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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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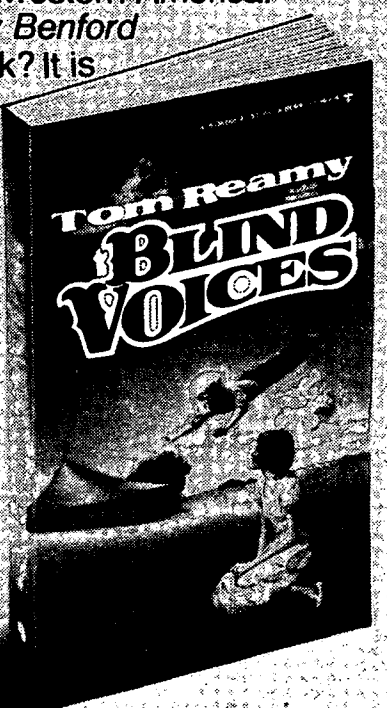

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EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher — ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist
DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager
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You will be devastated to learn that this is the final adventure in Gary Jenning's series about the Reverend Crispin Mobey, the SoPrim Church missionary who, in previous stories, has laid waste to substantial portions of the Australian outback, Transylvania, Korea, the Louisiana swamp country and deep space. In this final and hilarious episode, the Reverend turns his attention to New York City, and all Hell breaks loose.

Ignis Fatuus

BY

GARY JENNINGS

TO: The Board of Elders
Southern Primitive Protestant Church

FROM: Ignatz Feuerklotz, M.D.
New York, N.Y. 10028

SUBJ: Psychiatric evaluation of the Reverend Crispin Mobey

Gentlemen:

As per your request of the 17th inst., I secured the release of subject patient Crispin Mobey from Bellevue Hospital into my custody for the purpose of ascertaining, as you also requested, whether said patient is or will ever be capable of functioning again as a professional missionary — "or anything else," as you put it.

A note on procedure. An initial interview (filling out medical history form, etc.) and a routine but thorough physical examination disclosed no apparent somatic basis for the patient's recent disturbed and violent behavior. Next I questioned the patient while he was in a state of full consciousness and under no medication except a minimal dose of methylphenidate hydrochloride (a mild psychocathartic which promotes uninhibited loquacity). This session was not notably productive, as a short excerpt from the interview tape will indicate:

Dr. Feuerklotz: According to the court record, Reverend Mobey, you were sent to Bellevue's Flight Deck — excuse me, to Bellevue's Psychiatric Ward — because you insisted you were not in New York City but in Hell. I gather that you tried to fight your way out of Hell and, in the process, caused some property damage which impelled the New York City Police Department

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to take you in charge.

Rev. Mobey: Yes, sir. I was in Hell. Maybe I still am.

Dr. F: Why do you say that?

Rev. M: This office looks very much like the Registrar's office in Hell.

Dr. F: Please try to restrain any attempts at levity. This suite was designed by my nephew the interior decorator, Lance Hummingberg.

Rev. M: I'm sorry. It looks like Hell.

Therefore, at the next interview and all subsequent interviews, the patient was put into deep hypnosis and given an injection of sodium amytal (what laymen call a "truth drug").

Rev. M: This office still looks like Hell.

Dr. F: Never mind that. Reverend Mobey, I want you to tell me your story in your own words. Start from the beginning. Go through everything that happened, to the very end, then stop.

Rev. M: Yes, sir. Well, the SoPrim Church Headquarters sent me to New York....

Here follows a transcript of the analysand's story. For the sake of chronology and coherence, this transcript is a compilation from elements of tapes recorded over several sessions. The Reverend Mobey's occasional repetitions and digressions have been deleted, as have been the analyst's occasional questions asked to elicit more detailed clarification. Except for those deletions (and one other, indicated and explained hereinunder), the following is verbatim as the analysand told it.

The SoPrim Church headquarters sent me to New York as our delegate to the First International Ecumenical Conference of Missionaries. I was pleased to be selected for the honor, of course, but I had secret misgivings that I might be out of my league. For example, there would be present the rabbi who had conducted Elizabeth Taylor's bath mitzvah and the minister who had baptized Charles Colson after Watergate, before he went to prison. I had no such dramatic conversions to relate and no fulsomely autographed photos of celebrities to hand around. My missionary achievements, though perhaps considerable by some standards, were lackluster by comparison, and this troubled me. Yes, I admit it: my ego hurt. Also, all the other delegates were traveling first class, while my SoPrim expense account was — forgive the racist word — niggardly. To illustrate, the Christian Science missionary was quartered at the Waldorf Towers, but I had to put up at a coldwater hotel in East Harlem, so cheap and rundown that the Gideon Bible on the nightstand was a *paperback*.

Not that it mattered, I reckon. When the entire city blacked out, the other delegates must have found themselves as unhappy as I was.

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I had arrived in town on the evening before the morning when the first conference seminars were to commence. But I had barely unpacked my valise when Consolidated Edison again pushed the wrong button or something, as it had done in 1965 and 1977, and all of New York was plunged into darkness and chaos. As I made my way down the two rickety flights of stairs to the grubby lobby, to beg a candle for my room, I could not help gloating — yes, I admit it: gloating — that the Christian Scientist now had no more light, air conditioning, telephone, room service or hot water than I had. She would also have to fumble down some sixty flights of stairs to find a candle in the Waldorf's Peacock Alley.

As he handed me a wax stump stuck on a tin ashtray, the derelict night clerk nodded toward the street door and said, in his quaint New York dialect, "Yessir, ole Con Ed *really* done fuggup *dis* time. Just *look* at 'em out dar!"

All Hell had broken loose. There was no light, but rather darkness visible, and I could just perceive the even darker shapes of looters trotting up and down Third Avenue, their arms full. When night darkens the streets, I quoted to myself, then wander forth the sons of Belial, flown with insolence and wine. I also thought to myself that here, Crispin Mobey, may be your opportunity to do a Christian service to some endangered soul — and, not incidentally, to effect a conversion dramatic enough to be worth mentioning at the conference. With luck, I might even get mugged and, if not too terribly injured, bring the mugger to a glorious repentance. I thrilled at the prospect for — I admit it — I could imagine the other conferees, on the morrow, enviously gnashing their teeth as I declaimed: "In the Stygian darkness of that infernal night of nightmare, I ventured out among the maddened mobs and...."

I stepped out onto Third Avenue. After being buffeted by several running persons, I managed to grab the sleeve of one Hispanic-looking type and said compassionately, "I realize, my good fellow, that you are poor and deprived and underadvantaged and unemployed and discriminated against, but you still must give thought to your immortal soul and —"

"*Chinga* my immoral soul!" he chortled. "*Chinga* my rock group's recording contract with Motown while you're at it. Here, *'mano*, take one of these millions and have a ball. My treat. *Viva* Fun City!" He pressed a bound sheaf of $10,000 bills into my hand and vanished in the darkness, laughing maniacally.

It appeared that the looters had improved with practice over the years of power failures. Unlike 1977, when they had pilfered only liquor, TV sets and such trash, they now had learned that all the vaults of all the city's banks were locked by electromagnetic bolts.

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With the power off, the massive doors could be swung open at a touch. All a looter had to do was break a bank's plate-glass window by throwing a policeman or any other inanimate object, go downstairs to the vault and help himself.

Well, Crispin Mobey, I mused, so much for your salvation of some poor soul. Tonight there are no poor. And, as Matthew says, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. I abandoned the enterprise, chucked the million dollars into a "Don't Be A Litterbug" bin, climbed back to my room, got into bed, read my Bible (my own dear, well-thumbed, much-traveled SoPrim Bible, not the paper one) until the candle guttered and went out, when I composed myself for slumber.

Thinking back on things, I guess I should have suspected something weird when my portable clock-radio — tuned to WQXR, New York's cultural music station — clicked on at 6:00 the next morning. It woke me with a funereal, full-symphony-and-chorale rendition of "When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day." I promptly got up, abluted, dressed in my Sunday-best black serge, slicked down my cowlick and departed, to be bright and early at the conference.

I had previously spent some time in New York. So I know my way around it pretty well. As a temporarily displaced Southerner, I was amused to note that the conference headquarters' address was on Park Avenue *South*. "No doubt the Bible Belt of Manhattan," I said aloud to myself, and laughed. Whenever possible, I like to start the day off merrily, with an irresistibly hilarious joke of my own invention. Having laughed, I looked about sheepishly, lest some passerby take me for an eccentric. There were no passersby.

Either New Yorkers are not early risers or they did not yet realize that the city's power had been restored. Even in the Lexington Avenue subway station, there was not a single lurking rapist, pickpocket or drunken bum. So, not having to be on my guard while I waited for the train, I scanned the posters and graffiti on the station walls. I found them odd, to say the least.

One poster said simply and starkly: SUPPORT MENTAL HELLTH. Another was a reproduction of that horrific Goya etching which shows the demon-god Saturn devouring his first-born child; it was captioned: BETCHA CAN'T EAT JUST ONE. The graffiti were even odder — most of them obscene, others puzzling ("Dante's *Inferno* is hard as Hell to read"), others incomprehensible ("Dracula Sucks"). I averted my eyes and saw, on a waiting-bench, a discarded children's book. Its title (oh, these days of permissiveness!) was *The Kindergarten Guide to Gonorrhea*. I opened to the first line: "See Dick run." and hastily shut it again. The train thundered in

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just then, to my great relief, though it was as strangely empty as the station had been.

I hadn't realized that I had been waiting at an express platform, but this was obviously an express train. Roaring and howling, it careened at top speed down the inky tunnel, and the intermediate stations — all empty of people — were but brief explosions of light in the blackness. The train stopped once, at 42nd Street, where all trains stop. That platform is ordinarily jam-packed, but only one person was waiting. She stepped into the car in which I sat, and the train bansheed on again into the dark bowels of Manhattan. The woman carried a flashy red handbag, wore an excess of make-up and a petulant expression. She did not sit down, but leaned against one of the car stanchions. After flicking an uninterested glance at me, she lit a cigarette (in defiance of the signs all about) and stood puffing and pouting as the train insanely racketed on.

I began to fear that I was about to be carried willy-nilly to some such dreadful borough as Queens, but the train finally stopped again at a station marked Gehenna Street. I seemed to remember the name as being that of a street in a neighborhood called Little Italy — and an Italian graffito on the wall confirmed it (*"Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate!"*) — meaning that I was not impossibly far from Park Avenue; so I got out of the train.

The woman did, too (not following me, I hasten to say, but ahead of me), and I was astounded to see the handle of a switchblade knife protruding from between her shoulderblades. My first impulse was to call her own attention to this curiosity. But I reminded myself: this is New York. First rule: mind your own business. Anyway, it was probably the memento of a lovers' quarrel, and she wouldn't thank me for mentioning it.

Besides, I had another distraction. The Gehenna Street station was like any other on the subway (filthy and malodorous), except that the exit stairs oddly led not up but down. Then I remembered that, at intervals, New York's subways surge aboveground to become elevated tracks. I went down and down and down the stairs and emerged onto a street that could have been any of hundreds in Lower Manhattan, but it too was empty of people. Didn't a single New Yorker, I wondered, leave his radio or TV switched on during the blackout so he would know when the power came back on?

I stood still for a moment to get my bearings: "The sun rises in the east. If I face toward it, then my left hand...." But there on a corner post hung a Day-Glo orange arrow lettered THIS WAY. Ah, thought I, trust in my missionary brothers to organize a well-organized conference. I found other arrows at intervals, taking me a couple blocks in one direction, now and then around a corner, along another few blocks, until I came to one marked ENTER HERE,

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pointing at the doorway of an unremarkable office building. So engrossed had I been in following directions that only now did I notice the woman from the subway, just turning into that same building. I could hardly believe her to be a missionary. Had she perhaps been brought along by one of the delegates as a sample of The Missionary's Raw Material?

By the time I entered the lobby, she had taken one of the self-service elevators, before which stood another sign: REGISTRATION, 8th SUB-BASEMENT. I took an elevator, punched the proper button — Why are they always called elevators or lifts, when they go down as often as up? — and stepped out into a waiting room very like yours, Doctor Feuerklotz: The woman with the blade in her back was just saying to a pert receptionist: "Ginch, Darlene Mae."

"Dead on time, Miss Ginch. You're very prompt."

"I always was a quick comer," said the woman.

"Registrar Rahab will see you," said the receptionist, indicating one of two doors behind her. I stepped up to the desk in my turn, but, before I could speak, the girl beamed broadly and exclaimed, "The Reverend Crispin Mobey!"

I remarked modestly that I had not realized my identity was so widely known in evangelical circles, then said, "I expected quite a crowd. Where are all the other missionaries?"

"Oh, most of them will get here sooner or later," she said airily. "Meanwhile, Registrar Asmodeus canceled all other appointments for this morning, just to await your arrival." Still smiling, she indicated the other door behind her.

I entered an office quite like yours, Doctor, furnished with ostentatious expense, and a gentleman stood up from behind a massive desk to hold out his hand. He was tall, well-built, well-dressed, and handsome in a most distinguished way, but he gave me the impression of — how do I describe it? — of being *varnished* all over.

"Welcome, Mr. Mobey," he said in a pleasant baritone voice. "You don't mind if we dispense with honorifics?"

"All hail-fellows well met," I said genially. "Where do I sign in? Are there forms to fill out?"

"No, no. I have your dossier right here. Sent down from, er, upstairs." He took his seat again and began to riffle through a thick looseleaf binder. "Just like to go over a few items with you. Sit down, sir."

"I shouldn't like to miss the morning's first seminar," I said anxiously. "It's the one on 'How to Help the Elderly: (a) Make Out Their Will in Your Favor, and (b) —' "

"You haven't realized, then?" said the Registrar. "There will be no seminar this morning. Mr. Mobey, you are in Hell."

I chuckled. "Well, I know the Big Apple has gone rather to seed...."

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"The Big Apple is countless leagues above your head. Mr. Mobey, you are in Hell."

Somewhat nettled, I stood up. "Has last night's blackout deranged every last brain in Manhattan?"

"This is not Manhattan. Mr. Mobey, you are in Hell."

I sat down again. Something told me I was in Hell. I refused to believe this.

"I refuse to believe this," I said. "Dead perhaps, but *Hell?* Why, I was a *missionary!*"

The Registrar gave me a look both sad and angry. "We are *both* in Hell, you presumptuous puppy, and *I* was an *angel!*"

For the first time, his name rang a bell in my mind. "But you rebelled against God, Mr. Asmodeus, along with the Devil. What have I done to be linked with the Devil?"

Asmodeus said coldly, "I daresay the Dean — we prefer that designation — would rather *not* be linked with you, Mr. Mobey. I told you, your papers came down from that Satan upstairs."

"Satan upstairs?" I echoed.

"The being you call God."

Expectably, I exploded, "You dare call *Him* by the unholy name of Satan?!"

The demon Registrar said patiently, "Satan is not a name, holy or unholy. It is a Hebrew word meaning only 'the adversary.' Remember where you are, Mr. Mobey. Hell's adversary is in Heaven, and vice versa. Our Dean is, in fact, the lesser Satan who labors under orders from the higher. Surely you yourself preach that tenet of Judaeo-Christianity."

"But how has Satan — I mean the Dean — how has he managed to lay his evil hands on me?"

The demon answered my question with a question: "Why do you invariably refer to the Dean as a *he?*"

I was staggered. "This is too much!" I cried. "Do you mean to tell me that Women's Lib has even overthrown the patriarchy of Hell?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said a pleasant contralto voice. The distinguished gentleman had, in that instant, become a sultrily beautiful woman. "Your religion has always and rightly held that angels are immaterial beings. That was not changed by our demotion to demons. When and if we assume humanoid materiality, we can assume whichever sex we choose. I do. The Dean does. I mention this only to deter your perpetuating that age-old but undeserved sexist insult. The Dean is no more a *he* than a flame or a fountain is."

"Please do not confuse me further," I said confusedly. "Mr. Asmodeus — Miss Asmodea — I still don't understand why the Dean has dragged me down to her Hell. His. Its. Hell."

"This is not *the Dean's* Hell," said the lovely demoness, with a touch of exasperation. "Must I instruct you in your own religion, Mr. Mobey? It was

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the Satan in Heaven who created Hell, not our Dean, who merely serves as chief warden of it. The Satan in Heaven decides which sinners will be damned to eternal punishment, not our Dean, who merely administers that punishment. A jailer is never a popular character, I grant you, but would you blame the jailer for the necessity of a jail? For the cruel sentences pronounced by a harsh judge? For the crimes committed by the prisoners in the jailer's charge?"

"All right," I conceded. "God punishes the sinners who deserve it. But it is the Dean — the *Devil* — who tempts them into that sin!"

"Poppycock. Whyever should the Dean do that?"

"To win the souls of the damned, of course, to be her subjects and victims in her infernal domain. His. Its."

The demoness wrinkled her shapely nose. "An imperishable folk-tale, but palpably absurd. One of the chief torments of Hell today is its overcrowdedness and lack of privacy. There was a time when we could devote individual attention to each of the damned. We could provide Sisyphus, for example, with a boulder and a hill for it to roll up and down. Now that hill is invisible under ugly high-rise condominiums, each inmate's room a cramped and cardboard-walled cell, just as on Earth. Can you believe that our Dean would neglect the supervision of this teeming dominion to go wandering to and fro in the world, tempting and soliciting and signing Faustian contracts?"

"Yes," I said firmly, "Not long ago, the pope himself, *ex cathedra*, declared the Devil's deed a verity. While I seldom agree with Popery, the Bible says the same, and I do believe in the Bible. The word of God."

"Men wrote the words of the Bible," she sighed, "and men are prone to pass the buck. It was William Tyndale's Bible that coined the word 'scapegoat.' Mr. Mobey, allow me to point out that the Earth's population growth is alone sufficient to keep Hell increasingly supplied with sinners. Inundated with sinners. Take your own United States. In 1820, little more than a century and a half ago — just a tick of time as measured against eternity — the entire population of America numbered fewer than ten million. Now, in the United States today, there are a number of sinners doomed eventually to damnation. How many would you estimate?"

"I have no idea."

"Neither have I," said the demoness, taking from her desk a World Almanac. "However, as a presumptive index of Hell-bound sinners" — she found the page — "in the United States last year 10,460,084 persons were arrested for one crime or another. More people than *existed* in your country a clock-tick of eternity ago! And the number of arrests increases year after year. How can you possibly entertain the notion that Hell has to go scaveng-

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ing for candidates?"

"I know that the Devil can cite Scripture to his own purpose," I said, adamant, "so he is not likely to bedazzle me with statistics. No avalanche of facts can sway a man of faith. My beliefs are immutable. My mind is made up. You cannot change it."

"Would that I could," she murmured, "if this unbelievable dossier is to be believed. While we're speaking of your mind, Mr. Mobey, may I ask: have you ever undergone any IQ test?"

"I tried, just once, but I failed it."

"You *failed* it?!"

"Oh, I had some inspiring and moving thoughts to express, but the shortest of them added up to eighteen syllables." Speechless, Asmodea stared at me with superb but uncomprehending eyes. I had stunned a demoness. I began to suspect a communications breakdown. "We *are* talking about haiku?" I ventured. "A haiku poem, you know, is strictly confined to seventeen syllables."

She lowered her head and raised an ivory hand to shade her face from my view. After a moment she said weakly, "I begin to believe the dossier. I even begin to sympathize with the adversary. Dean help me but I do." She shook her lovely head as if to clear it, then faced me again. "Mr. Mobey, if there existed a world of dominoes, you would have been born the double-blank. Be glad you are merely in Hell."

"I most decidedly am not glad!" I said fiercely. "I demand to know why!"

"Very well." She leveled her fine eyes on me and became very businesslike. "Heaven, unlike Hell, does have to beat the bushes for candidates worthy of admission. It appears that Heaven had its welcome mat ready for a number of promising eligibles, but those persons somehow fell prey to the missionary ministrations of the Reverend Crispin Mobey and somehow thereby bungled their hope of Heaven. I don't have all the details. However —"

I tried to say an extenuating word, but she shushed me.

"To be blunt, our Hell already has half a dozen inmates who will spend eternity in a torment relieved only by their being allowed occasionally to burn an effigy of Crispin Mobey in the brimstone left over from their ordeals. No, please do not interrupt. We will of course take every precaution that you are assigned to some safely distant pit. However, there is nothing we can do to assuage the fury of that Heaven you deprived of these once-promising recruits. Which is why the word came down from Satan up there: *Get Crispin Mobey!*"

As you may imagine, Dr. Feuerklotz, this was an unutterably demolishing blow to me. That the deity I had tried so long and so hard and so fervently to serve should now (as the jargon has it) put out a contract on me, and — unkindest cut of all — had entrusted that contract to our mutual enemy.

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"I can't believe," I said slowly, maybe even whimpering, "that God — or the Dean — or you, ma'am — could deem me a wicked man."

"Wicked? No, not a bit of it, Mr. Mobey. To be wicked, a man must have either an idea or an ambition. I see no evidence in your dossier that you have ever shown a flicker of either."

"Then for what am I damned? I know my missionary excursions have sometimes petered out rather dismally, but...."

"Ineptitude is not actionable. Nor is stupidity, or Hell would be bursting its welds. No, we had to wait and watch to catch you in a sin. Your coming to New York gave us our first opportunity."

I said with asperity, "I can readily credit that New York's daily influx consists preponderantly of sinners, Miss Asmodea. But I came in all innocence and good intent to participate in a convocation of *missionaries.*"

"And succumbed to two sins — no, hear me out — not in deed, but in thought. You coveted the superior accommodations of a spinster Christian Scientist. You hoped for an encounter which you could relate with pride to your colleagues. If I may cite Scripture, Mr. Mobey: 'As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.' And of the scriptural seven deadly sins, Pride and Covetousness rank first and second."

"But," I said piteously, "such a puny little pride, such a trifling little ...."

"We often hear that from the condemned. 'Why couldn't I have had world enough and time to enjoy some really raunchy sins?' If it will make you feel better, Mr. Mobey, to validate your damnation with a more cavalier transgression, go right ahead." She made a gesture of dismissal and pushed a button on her desk.

"I am Marie," said a mischievously tinkling voice with a trace of foreign accent. "I have been ordered to seduce you."

On her head, Marie wore an extravagant high-rise hairdo of platinum blonde, decorated with little bows and glittery gewgaws, like a spun-glass Christmas tree. On her cheek she wore a heart-shaped beauty mark. Around her neck she wore a silvery-gray ribbon choker, heavily studded with sparkling gems that might have been diamonds. Below that she wore nothing at all. Well, it was a very warm room.

"Thank you, miss, but I'm not exactly in the mood for —"

"In Hell you have no will of your own, Mr. Mobey. You would know that if you had read Dante. Of course *I* never would have — it is hard as Hell to read — but Lou made me because he said I wasn't intellectual enough for —"

"Please, miss, don't chatter on so."

"You are right. Why waste time? *Allez toujours!*"

DELETION: Not to shock you rever-

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end gentlemen who ordered this report — and not to shock the Reverend Mobey, who will remember nothing of the moot episode after being awakened from hypnosis — I here exercise my professional prerogative to delete from this transcript a "privileged communication." In brief, the analysand here describes a series of sexual divertissements, most of them (and I speak as a physician) physically impossible. Either the analysand is phenomenally ignorant of anatomy, especially female anatomy, or he is here hallucinating a manic wish-fantasy born of libido too long suppressed. — Ignatz Feuerklotz, M.D.

Afterward, I remarked sleepily to Marie, "You never once closed your eyes."

"Neither did you. You can't. Nor can any of us *damnés*. In Hell, we have no eyelids. It is part of the punishment, not to be able to shut out the sights we have to see."

"Umn," I said sleepily. "I reckon I can understand that. But what I can't understand, Marie — you don't mind being stark naked from the neck down, but you keep this little gray ribbon...."

"Oh, please, do not touch the clasp!"

But I already had, and the ribbon came loose in my hand, and I came wide awake with horror, for Marie's head fell off her body and rolled across the iron floor, muttering, *"Salaud gauche...."*

"Gauche of you, yes, but don't let it haunt you," said Asmodeus, in whose office I instantly found myself. She was back in her — he was back in his masculine materialization. "You didn't decapitate her, Mobey. The guillotine did, on December 7, 1793. But tell me: do you feel sinful enough now that you might be more at peace with your fate? After all, fornication with a trollop, loss of your virginity..."

"But against my will," I stipulated. "For I *have* no will here. Marie said Dante said so. It can hardly count against me if —"

"Spare me the casuistry. Answer yes or no. Did you enjoy it?"

I blushed and was silent.

"Well, then," said the demon, briskly rubbing his hands. "I'm glad we have so expeditiously handled a rather extraordinary case. Now there only remains the matter of your assignment. Again in view of the exceptional circumstances, we might even find a soft berth for you, Mobey. Perhaps in the typing pool of the offices here. The typewriters are all IBM electrics, and they short-circuit frequently, just as on Earth. When you're not getting electrocuted, the typewriter keyboard and your Postur-Bak chair are merely red-hot. How's your typing and spelling?"

"I never learned to type," I said. He looked put out, so I added hastily, "But I can spell, Mr. Asmodeus. A-S-S-uh—"

"On second thought," said Asmo-

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deus, "I think you might profit from a tour of the facilities. The damned are often adept at finding their own fitting niche. Let's see, you'll need a guide." He twirled a rotary card-file. "Gilles de Rais? Justice Hathorne? No, here's a congenial companion for you. Montague Summers, once a preacher like yourself. Indeed, in his lifetime he applauded the damnation of so many of his fellow mortals that he nauseated our own Dean and even Heaven's Satan. If Hell had never existed, it would have been founded the day Summers died, so the detestable creature could dwell in it." The demon actually shuddered. "Escorting you will constitute his first — and last — reprieve from a torment indescribable."

The ex-Reverend Summers wore a vestment of some sect or order I did not recognize. He also wore a beetling scowl to express his displeasure at seeing that I yet bore no scars of scourge or flame. For that matter, I could see no scars on him either, and I wondered what singularly special punishment had been devised for this most despised mortal in Hell.

"We will begin," Summers said hoarsely, "with Hell's newest additions here in the Sisyphus Metroplex." He was leading me through a built-up area as repellently grandiose and tasteless as any new development in Miami. "I want to show you the quarters prepared for our younger arrivals — I believe you call them teen-agers. Yes, I am happy to say we're getting more young people than we used to. Nip the evil in the bud was what I preached all my life. I always deplored our squeamish world's abolition of the burning stake. But I am gratified now by the drug overdoses and motorcycle crashes that bring the little beasts to Hell before they can grow up into full-fledged monsters. Here you see one of the apartments designed specifically for them."

"This is Hell?" I said. The room was furnished rather like one in any college frat house. The quad system was playing Mahler's magnificent First Symphony. The room-service menu listed such delicacies as shad roe, Chateaubriand, Camembert. The shelves bore all the world's best books. "Why, I should hardly mind spending eternity here myself."

"Ah, you or I, yes," said Summers. "But imagine the nasty little brutes trying to writhe and grind their pelvises to that music. Notice the substitution of books for television. The room remains immaculately clean, however desperately the occupant tries to befoul it. The telephone will not permit communication with anyone under thirty. The only mode of locomotion available to the tenant is walking. The cigarettes on that table are made of tobacco. Now compare this other room, prepared for someone older."

I recoiled from the blare of a transistor radio: *"Luuv yew, baybay! Wawnchew, baybay!"* The room's clashing colors of bile and vomit flick-

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ered blindingly under strobe lighting. The furniture was smeared with nose-pickings and pimple-poppings. Long hair-combings drifted across the floor. The air was thick with marijuana smoke and the reek of junk food frying in grease. The TV had no turn-off switch and incessantly replayed an endless-loop tape of the new punk-rock entertainment duo, Earwax and Toejam, two revolting adolescents who were at this moment dissecting a live baby koala while the laugh-track convulsed with glee.

As I reeled, retching, out of the room, Summers said, "If this were your assigned Hell, you could not just walk out. Your only temporary escape would be to ride out on a trailbike or snowmobile, unmuffled of course, and tear up some quiet, unspoiled wilderness."

"It — it would be Hell, all right."

"Ah, but it would be Heaven for the tenant of that other room. These two disparate cells prove a point. Hell is not necessarily a fire everburning. It is not even necessarily a place. Hell is whatever hurts worst. Solitude for the gregarious. A mob jostling the loner. Even eternal bliss for the masochist. Hell can be — many things...." His scowl got blacker.

"And what is it for you, Reverend Summers?" I asked, knowing that, will-less here, he had to reply with the truth.

"I sit day and night at a window," he said grudgingly, "where I watch what is happening to all those witches and warlocks against whom I preached and wrote, those at whose executions I exulted, because they *deserved* to suffer eternally in Hell." He raked his fingers down his face, the nails drawing blood. "They are all in Heaven."

It took a while for him to recover; then he said, "Come. You will also want to see the more traditional aspects of Hell."

I didn't, really, but it was plain that he did. So we visited the bubbling asphalt pits, the sweltering mills, the red-glowing blast furnaces, the sudorific machine rooms, the seething steam laundries, the heat-pulsing ovens, the clangorous boiler rooms. Actually, except for the fact that none of these places was air-conditioned, and in none of them did the workers stand around enjoying coffee breaks or planning union walkouts or sabotaging the machinery — they all labored and sweated like hot coolies — I didn't see too much difference between these places and, say, the auto plants of Detroit, Mich., or the mills of Paterson, N.J. They even had some of the same amenities, like Muzak.

We next visited Hell's euphemistically named Discipline Department, and though I won't dwell on it, I understand it also has its counterparts on Earth. Watching one disciplinary action — it involved a terrified naked girl and a brazen phallic idol fired to incandescence — Montague Summers got so enraptured that I was able to slip away

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from him unnoticed, when I heard someone hiss, "Psst, tovarisch," from a dark corner.

"The word's got around that you're a preacher," said the man, when I sneaked over to him. I guess it was a man; his skin had long since crisped away under a basting of hot pitch.

"I am," I said. "Or was."

"We never get to see a sky-pilot," said the wretch. "How come you ain't in their corner of Hell?"

"I just arrived. I suppose I will go there."

"Try not to," said the man, waving away the smoke of his burning so he could see me. "Their torment is to sit and listen to each other preach, one after another after another throughout eternity. You'd like it better out with us hard cases. Some of us been around in our time. You'd sure hear some better stories."

"I daresay. But why should you, er, hard cases want to associate with, er, a sky-pilot?"

"Well, for one thing, it's forbidden. For another, some of us got a plan to escape. We figure we'll stand a better chance if we got a man of the cloth along."

"You may have a point," I said. "I wonder, though, if it would be ethical for me to connive in —"

"*Ethical?*" The word came in a blurt of smoke from where his lips had been. "How ethical is it for a man of the cloth to *be* here?"

"You definitely have a point —" I began but was interrupted.

"Reverend Mobey, where are you?" called Reverend Summers. "We'll move on now to the Correction Chambers."

"I'll be back," I promised the pitch-slathered man. "Will you be right here?"

"Ha! I've been in this corner since the day I died in 1547, when I forgot to doff my hat to Prince Ivan Basilovitch and he had it nailed to my head. I ain't going nowhere, tovarisch."

It was not hard to slip away from Montague Summers again when, at the Correction Chambers, he stood avidly watching England's King Edward II suffer the twice-daily reenactment of his well-merited execution in 1327 — an execution performed then and now by a means too ghastly for me to describe. I hurried back to that dark corner of the Discipline Department and found quite a crowd waiting for me. The pitch man had convened all those planning to escape with him.

"What is your plan, then?" I asked him.

"We plan to bust out of here."

"Yes, but how?"

"Well, I haven't worked that out yet."

When I could speak, I said acidly, "You've had nearly five hundred years to think about it, and you haven't got further than *intending* to break out?"

"What's the hurry? We can take five *million* years to polish the details."

"And here I had hoped —" I choked

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up with frustration. But then an idea came to me, an idea so brilliant that it seemed literally to light up that dark corner of the abyss.

I had allegedly been sent to Hell because Heaven was piqued at not getting enough mortal souls. But suppose I sent Heaven some souls it had given up as irretrievably lost! Many a missionary has turned mere *mortals* from the paths of sin onto the road to Heaven. But never in history has a missionary ever salvaged the *already-damned.* If I, Crispin Mobey, could do that, surely I too would be redeemed. It would probably be a tough job, but....

"Have you ever," I said to the pitch-plastered man, my voice trembling with excitement, "have you ever thought of *praying* your way out of Hell?"

"Huh?"

"Confessing, repenting, praying to God, from Whom all blessings flow."

"Look, tovarisch, this flow of hot tar is bad enough. I should risk maybe molten lava?"

"There is hope, man!" I insisted. "The last words of the Psalms say. 'Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord.' You're breathing, aren't you? Praise Him loudly enough and —"

"Preacher, it was the Lord put me here. I killed maybe a dozen muzhiks before the prince killed me."

"But maybe you've atoned sufficiently by now, and God is just waiting to be asked for amnesty. Isn't it worth a try? Come, brothers, all of you, join me in praising the Lord!" And I warbled so that the dread caverns rang:

"Hell's foundations quiver
At the shout of praise;
Brothers, lift your voices,
Loud your anthems raise!"

I know my voice is not of the most melodious, but I think it was the sentiment of the hymn that made them all writhe and contort and wail, "No! No! It was God put us here! Spare us the Name!" It suddenly occurred to me that this commotion might bring Summers to collar me again. So I said, "I must fly, brothers, but I'll be back —"

"No! No! For pity's sake!"

"— And when you're feeling better, we'll give it another try."

Their anguished nay-saying and doom-crying faded behind me as I scuttled down a convenient tunnel, still congratulating myself on my brainwave and thinking: this could be the biggest thing ever to hit Hell.

Except for its fierier parts, Hell is quite dark and full of hideaway nooks and crannies. I never saw Montague Summers again — I suppose he is back at his window on Heaven forevermore — and for a week I managed to dodge the searching guard demons and ignore the loudspeakers everywhere that yammered ceaselessly for Crispin Mobey to report to Registrar Asmodeus. I kept my body nourished by sipping from alkali puddles and nibbling the fungi that ringed them. My spirit, nourished by my new-hatched

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plan, was more alive than it ever had been even on Earth. But I regret to say that, as with all new products, mine met some initial consumer resistance.

I found a group of lead-mine workers, so crazed by lead poisoning that they were laboring feverishly even though no supervisory demon was anywhere in sight. "Fellow damnees," I said, "let us raise hosannahs unto the Lord." If I had been killable, their pickax blows would have killed me. But of course they were crazy.

I knelt over an old hag, who moaned as she was eternally gnawed by the Worm Ouroboros, and said, "Madam, God's mercy is yours for the asking." She stopped moaning and started simultaneously guffawing and shrieking, "Stop! Stop! It only hurts when I laugh!" But of course she was hysterical.

I would never have given up, had I not been lured into a trap. I came upon what looked like a purely routine torment: a most fetching young lady was being eternally ravished by a flint-scaled dragon (scaly all over). I called to her under the monster's belly, "Be of good cheer, miss, for the Lord's help is at hand!" Then the posse of demons jumped me, and I was soon back before Asmodeus' desk. Asmodea's, rather. I spoke before she could open her mouth and said without the least contrition:

"I suppose I have doomed myself to the deepest pit of all. Well, do your worst, for I refuse to stop doing good."

"Good," she said, to my vast surprise, and smiled. "You have already done something unique in the annals of Hell. You have caused the Dean to admit to an oversight."

"You can't mean — my damnation was a mistake after all?"

"Oh, no. You're here for keeps. But the Dean now invites you to accept an administrative position. You will have rank and privileges nearly approximating my own. Since the dawn of mankind and sin, only a handful of mortals have been thus honored here. Judas Iscariot, Torquemada, Hitler...."

"Miss Asmodea," I said grimly, "send me to the nethermost pit before you mention my name in the same breath as —"

"Let me finish. You rebelled against Hell just as our Dean once rebelled against Heaven, and that alone has won you Hellwide admiration. But more important, your activities have been closely monitored, and your example as a maverick missionary has made the Dean realize that it was thoughtless of us to keep all the damned clergymen forever penned together and preaching at one another. They are to be loosed from their segregation and dispersed as missionaries all over Hell. You have blazed a missionary trail, Crispin Mobey, and the Dean personally invites — nay, begs — you to take charge of training, organizing and supervising this missionary corps from here to eternity."

I goggled. "Do you mean to tell me

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that you are willing to allow the conversion and salvation and redemption of all the souls in Hell?"

"Well, we're willing to let you do your best. But the main thing is, you see, it's the one torment we never before thought of inflicting on the damned."

This insult was the final straw. For the first time in my life (and, fittingly, in Hell) I saw red. I said through my teeth, "Turn back into a man, woman, so I may strike you with my fist." And she did and I did.

Dr. Feuerklotz: Well?

Rev. Mobey: You told me to stop when I came to the end.

Dr. F: And that is all?

Rev. M: All that matters. I gave Asmodeus a terrific biff, and then I ran amok in his office, smashing furniture, turning over file cabinets. The next thing I remember, I was locked up in Bellevue.

Dr. F: What you actually smashed up was a four-dollar-a-night room in the Prestigious Arms Hotel in the slums of upper Third Avenue. Does that tell you anything?

Rev. M: No, sir. I reckon Asmodeus could have faked that.

Dr. F: But there are two other anomalies in your story. The Marie who was guillotined on December 7, 1793, would have been the Countess du Barry, mistress to King Louis XV and a number of other notable Frenchmen.

Rev. M: Gee, a countess.

Dr. F: According to your further account, a man in Hell claimed to have been executed by a Prince Ivan Basilovitch in 1547. That prince later assumed the title of Czar and is known to history as Ivan the Terrible. Whoever your burning man might have been, he was patently a Russian.

Rev. M: And this is supposed to tell me something, too?

Dr. F: A French woman and a Russian man consistently addressed you in colloquial modern English, which they could hardly have known how to speak. Think about it.

(Some minutes of silence.)

Rev. M: I was — putting the words in their mouths?

(Some minutes of silence.)

Rev. M: It was a dream? A nightmare? I dreamt it all?

Dr. F: You have said the secret word, sir. Dream.

Rev. M: I dreamt the whole thing! I was never damned! I am still on good terms with the Lord! Oh, Doctor, how can I ever thank you? I owe you my sanity! My soul!

Dr. F: Now, now. No affective transference, please. I shall be amply thanked when I write this up for the *APA Journal.* Now, when I snap my fingers, Reverend Mobey, you will say firmly, 'It was all a dream.' At that, you will awake and the vivid details of the dream will already be fading. Within a day or so, even its outline will have been forgotten. It will never trou-

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ble you more.

(Snap.)

Rev. M: It was all a dream!

TO THE BOARD OF ELDERS: And so I return to you, reverend gentlemen, the Reverend Crispin Mobey, "exorcised of his demons" (if you will pardon the levity), and once again as mentally stable and functional as he ever was or can be. I enclose my statement of fee for professional services rendered. I also enclose all of the Reverend Mobey's personal effects, for which I signed when I took custody from Bellevue Hospital, to wit:

The clothing and spectacles he was wearing.

One simulated-leather valise containing additional haberdashery, toiletries, divinity college diploma, Bible, cross, other incidentals.

One portable clock-radio.

Contents of pockets: keys, comb, wallet, Greyhound bus ticket, cash to the amount of $37.76 in bills and change, traveler's cheques to the amount of $175.00, missionary ID credentials, and one printed invitation to the First International Ecumenical Conference of Missionaries.

One rhinestone-studded asbestos ribbon with broken brass clasp.

Yours truly,

Ignatz Feuerklotz, M.D.

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Books

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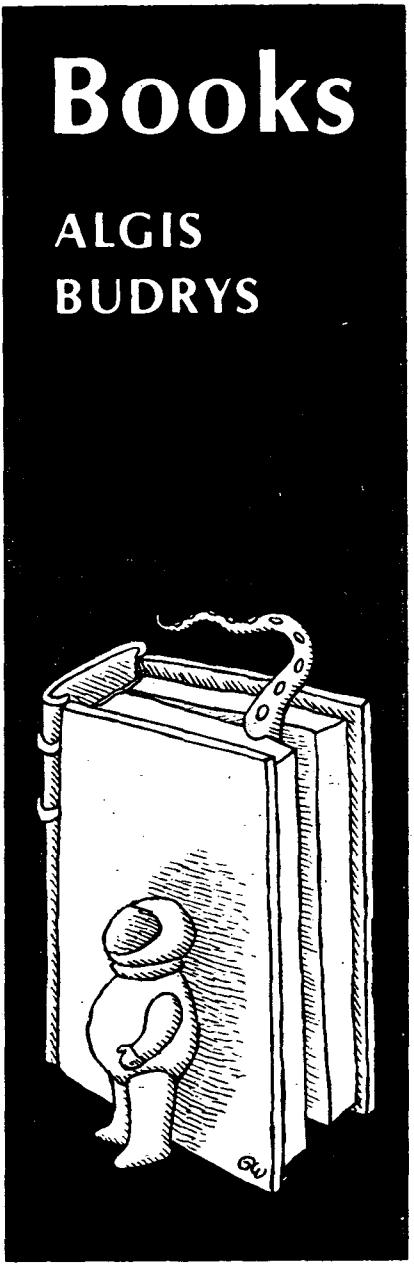

The Fountains of Paradise, Arthur C. Clarke, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $10.00

Earth Magic, Alexei and Cory Panshin, Ace, $1.95

Jem, Frederik Pohl, St. Martin's, $10.00

Infinite Dreams, Joe Haldeman, St. Martin's, $8.95

Medusa's Children, Bob Shaw, Doubleday, $7.95

Perhaps it's something in the air. I've never seen so many really good, major novels appear in SF so close together. There is at least as much junk as ever, too; fumbling, spavined, pretentious, crappy. Of the 30-or-so SF books that appear every month, any given one makes its day a spoiled pudding. But every two weeks or so since about the beginning of 1979, there's been a feast. This is beyond comprehension, and out of all previous proportion. Do you suppose there's something to the proposition that paying more money encourages better work? Is this an actual, measurable effect of the flood of publishers' dollars that has burst upon the field in the past few years?

Is it, perhaps, a freak? At this pace, the year will see over a score of books that will endure as milestones in SF. Is that even remotely credible? And is the easy thought — the one about money — the accurate thought?

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I have the feeling that SF historians will be picking over at least the first months of 1979 for years, formulating explanations. I suspect I'll be among them. At the moment, I really don't know what to tell you, so let's get to reviewing:

Perhaps it's not astonishing that Arthur C. Clarke should have written a good book. One expects it. One thinks of the powerful mysticism of *Childhood's End* or *2001*, or the sheer majesty of *Rendezvous with Rama*. But by and large there have always been two kinds of Clarke story, distinct from each other. There are those in which the mysticism predominates, and the strength of the work derives almost entirely from his ability to evoke images of transcendence ... of universes beyond the perceptibly material, and forces which, though real and potent, can never be measured by mundane instruments. The effect is the effect of the *2001* movie; the image is the image of Man rising toward Heaven in the belly of a whale, as in *Childhood's End*.

Not conversely, but certainly in distinct parallel, there is the technology-procedural novel, such as *Prelude to Space* or *A Fall of Moondust*. Certainly, the human protagonists rise to emotional heights and express much of what is best in resourceful, imaginative humanity. But they do this in response to materialistic situations, and their arena is a confined technological situation. The alien construct in *Rama*, for example, is sufficiently large and various so that many mini-sagas occur within it, but it does have boundaries, and the scope of the human action does not exceed them by much.

I'm not aware of any previous Clarke novel which does what is done by his latest, *The Fountains of Paradise*. It seems to me that this is the first instance in which all the author's demonstrated capabilities have melded. Not *perfectly*, mind you — there are slight discontinuities in the narrative, as if a longer manuscript had been cut a shade too much — but more than well enough to constitute a crucial event in Clarke's career, and thus in SF.

There are two stories: of the attempt of King Kalidasa to build a tower into Heaven, in ancient times, and of the attempt of Vannevar Morgan to build an elevator from the Earth's surface to an orbital terminus in the twenty-second century. Both build on Taprobane, Clarke's mythical island modelled after Sri Lanka.*

Morgan's proposed elevator is forty thousand kilometers tall, its engineering based on a new cable filament of enormous tensile strength. Major portions will be built in space, and lowered downward. King Kalidasa builds a towering pleasure garden, balefully observ-

**Ceylon, until recently, in most geographies. "Taprobane" is a classical synonym for Sri Lanka, where Clarke has resided for many years. Clarke adopts the synonym, but moves the island 800 kilometers south.*

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ed by monks of Sri Kanda, the sacred mountain. When Morgan arrives, twenty centuries later, the monastery still exists, and his ambition is as much an affront as was that of the parricidal tyrant. Morgan has no choice ... the elevator must be based where geophysical considerations demand, if it is to be built on Earth at all. Kalidasa — complex, resolute and heedless — built where he felt beauty lay nearest, and brooked no one's contradictory opinion.

Morgan is already a controversial figure. Successful builder of the bridge across the Gibraltar straits, he refuses to be deterred from this new project by any political or economic obstacle, and engages in energetic backroom politicking in order to materialize his breathtaking vision. Religious opposition does not seem to him to be particularly relevant to his list of major difficulties to be overcome. Kalidasa, contemplating military defeat in his old age, muses on his difficulties, but does not approach them with any great agitation. Yet each of these individuals collides in due course with the difference between what Man can do and what Man may do. In each case, the material price is life itself. What the price obtains may or may not be even more precious.

Clarke's physical setting is enough to send almost anyone to his travel agent. The mood of that ancient land, and the natural and Man-made beauties to be found there, are not only drawn directly from the actual Sri Lanka but are depicted with a poetic skill worthy of a Loren Eiseley. The elevator — an actual contemporary proposed solution to the problem of moving freight to and from an economically feasible orbit — is no less thrilling a creation, in the best and deepest sense of that abused adverb.

Signet will eventually publish the paperback. But if you react to this book as I expect you will, you'll need the hardcover edition, for keeping. Some stories fully bear out the classic SF assertion that it is a proud and lonely thing to be a man.*

Earth Magic is a superb, moody, intricate fantasy which, alas all chronology, fell into my hands late, after having been published in October. Alexei and Cory Panshin have duplicated Alexei's feat, in his *Rite of Passage*, by portraying an unsympathetic culture through the eyes of a sympathetic character who is adherent to its ways. But they have then gone beyond that technical achievement, and produced a scenario in which none of the ostensible major

**You may take it that I mean to include female intelligent individuals equipped with hands. Many common terms — "chairman" for example — derive from the Latin* manus, *not from the Teutonic* mann. *But that's beside the point; the awkward fact is that most of the readily accessible generic terms about people have that awkward sexist syllable in them somewhere, and at times I am unable to avoid it.*

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events are what they seem on first reading. There is nothing for it but to go back to the beginning immediately after reaching the end; fortunately, this is an unalloyed pleasure.

Haldane, the young son of a deposed tyrant, flees for safety and revenge. In an almost passing moment, he is enigmatically bound to the earth-goddess, Libera, but the press of incessant physical adventure in his medieval culture distracts Haldane and the reader from even beginning to explore what this may entail. With an innocence so profound that it permits him the illusion of increasing sophistication, he makes his way toward a genuinely terrifying climactic confrontation, there to learn — as we learn — just how subtle and disquietingly verisimilitudinous magic can be.

There are plenty of good heroic fantasies around — Larry Niven's *The Magic Goes Away* (Ace trade paperback, illustrated by Esteban Maroto, $4.95) would have deserved a more extensive mention in some other season — but *Earth Magic* is a genuine novel, a very good genuine novel, and a stunningly ingenious novel.

Frederik Pohl's *Jem* is not as good as *Gateway*, better than *Man Plus*. What does that mean? It means few books are as good as *Gateway*, and rarely has an SF author immediately followed a major triumph with as major a triumph as this. What do I mean by "good?" I mean the author was in clear command of all the essential details of a worthwhile narrative. What do I mean by "major?" I mean the narrative embodies a theme of significance beyond the immediate fortunes of the characters involved, and the theme is dealt with intelligently.

Jem is one of the names of a recently discovered extrasolar planet circling a particularly meager star. It supports at least three intelligent races. One, mole-like, dwells underground. Another, arthropodal, roams the surface. A third, whose gas-expanded bodies displace more than their weight, balloons in the atmosphere, keeping company in great, soaring schools, and singing. In Jem's perpetual ruddy twilight, they have coexisted for millenia, eating each other at opportunity, interfering here and there with each other's destinies, but maintaining withal a viable balance and their three distinct cultures.

The balloonists appear to be roughly on a level with Terrestrial whales. The arthropods and the moles seem more advanced materially, but are a little less complex than humans. In any event, Jem as Pohl has created it is believable and often beautiful, without being obviously just Earth in a funny hat.

The problem is that Earth has attained interstellar travel no more than a lifetime from now. It is broken up into power groups based on resources — there is a Fuel bloc, a Food bloc, etc. — and while they must trade back and

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forth to exist, they are constantly poised on going to war. The Earth is despoiled, and its inhabitants know it, cannot deny it, do hate it, and realize there is no way to reverse the situation. But Jem — a virgin planet — seems to offer hope of a fresh start for some, and such individuals are the ones whom the three contending major blocks recruit and send on three rival expeditions there.

With systematic, undeviating logic, Pohl depicts the consequent rape of Jem. As each of the expeditions struggles to do its best, there are moments of hope, and moments of triumph. But they are all no more than peaks on a downhill slope. The ending of it all is so genuinely sad that one realizes abruptly how rarely SF evokes pure sorrow, and how profound Pohl's vision was in conceiving of this story.

The individual segments, too, are written in a masterly manner. Characterization and description on this level of competence are not often seen in any genre of contemporary fiction. Everything in this book is on the master plane, excepting the return of an old Pohl touch — the killing off of superfluous characters who were introduced because they might do necessary work, but who proved superfluous as the story tightened.

What is genuinely disappointing in so good a piece, however, is the absence of scenes that were foreshadowed, were necessary in terms of that foreshadowing, but are never delivered. Characters begin a clearcut promising course of action, and then, when next seen, have abandoned it without explanation or for some almost whimsical reason which sounds like an author justifying an abandoned thread with a *post facto* rationalization.

In other words, there is that same feeling one gets from certain passages in the Clarke ... that there was originally a longer manuscript, but a not fully competent editor has been at it. Not badly enough to truly wound, but enough to impair what might have been (even) better.

I don't know what significance that has in relation to the fact that these three preceding books are part of an explosion of excellence. What flaws *Earth Magic* has are different flaws — there is no book written of which no complaint could be made — and in any case we are dealing with work that most practitioners of entirely satisfactory SF could never hope to equal. Still, I cannot dismiss the tentative feeling that there may be some sort of correlation.

Well, too much heavy thinking at one time is bad for the digestion. Onward:

For admirers of the short story, I can do no better than to recommend Joe Haldeman's *Infinite Dreams*. Witty, graceful, often stinging, the pieces collected here are from the major media for short-length SF, including

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this magazine. They include such tricky constructs as "Counterpoint" and "Juryrigged," some good funny things like "All the Universe in a Mason Jar," and some creatively nasty thinking as in "To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal," which I assume the gentleman in question did not take up.

Haldeman could still, at this comparatively advanced date since his debut, go in almost any direction within the SF pantheon. Nor is it automatically and necessarily true that the needs of SF readers would be best served if all SF writers were heavyweights. Furthermore, none of us can fairly be asked to become something other than what we might be. Still and all, it's comforting to know that the cadre of impressive talent among younger writers is not diminishing, and to think that people like Haldeman will be around for a long time to set high standards.

Whatever, this collection contains excellent, skillful entertainment. What it promises for the future is one thing; there is sufficient worth in what it delivers now.

In any other season, as with Niven's quite well-done fantasy, Bob Shaw's *Medusa's Children* would have been a piece of science fiction reviewed much farther front in this column. In many respects, it delivers what most people read SF for — an ingenious conditional reality so well presented that the reader experiences a sense of actually living in a situation that never

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was, nor probably ever will be.

The SCUBA divers among us will bridle at the behavior of air and currents in the underwater milieu to which Shaw first takes us. Have no fear — Shaw knows what he's doing; he's a step ahead of us, and a big, mind-joggling step it is, too.

Shaw posits two human cultures set in the foreseeable future. One, living in about the same old way, inhabits an Earth where resources are tighter and political balances have shifted. Hal Tarrant, deserter from a ramshackle mercenary air force, is trying to make a living as a kelp farmer in the Pacific. Particularly resourceful and intelligent squids appear to be nullifying his efforts.

The other culture is a semibarbaric tribal enclave of humans who live entirely under salt water, trapping air bubbles, living in the hulks of sunken ships and aircraft, and foraging for drinkable ice at the surface. They are dying out; too many powerful predators, better suited to the environment, compete for a living within their ecology. In addition, a mysterious baleful intelligence is suspected of living "at the center of the world," and is worshipped as a god.

Gradually, Shaw brings these two story lines together. The various anomalies are reconciled, intertwined, and brought to a satisfactory climax. I will not spoil Shaw's ingenious construct by going into more detail about how all that goes. I think it is fair to remind you, however, that British SF, which formed a major part of Shaw's creative data-base when he was first deciding how and what to write, includes the extravagant traditions of the "thriller," in which some of the data can legitimately boggle as well as joggle. It is, I think, paradoxically a rather different definition of "thrill" from the one expatriate Clarke uses.

And so we are here at the end of this column. But there's plenty of material for the next one, and for that I thank you authors, ladies and gentlemen; it has never been so satisfying to be a reviewer.

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Neal Barrett, who wrote "The Flying Stutzman," July 1978, returns with a good, strong story about an old soldier in a war that was fought so far away that no one on Earth saw it or cared much about it.

Hero

BY

NEAL BARRETT, JR.

What I told Colonel Dark was he could shove it all the way up and break it off, for all I cared. I sure wasn't going to ride in no ground-hog parade.

"Sergeant Ash, you sure are going to do just that," Dark told me.

"Sir, I'm not. Begging the colonel's pardon."

"It is all set, boy, and I reckon you are."

I looked across the desk at him. You got to check twice to make sure the man is sitting. Jack's seven foot eight in his socks — shoulders wide as rail ties, and a chest like big black sacks of cement. Long-steppin' legs hard as good oak, and fists the size of baby heads. I'm no boy-child, myself — but I'm no Jack Dark, either.

He was dressed the same as me — spit and blister boots, pitch-night skinners, and star-silver piping from shoulder to toe. From the head on up, we're not much alike. Jack's got this black rubber face he's worn since Razoridge — darker'n his own was, and twice as ugly.

"Jack," I told him, "you're 'bout the scariest nigger I ever seen."

"You just remember I am, cracker," he said solemnly.

"If I was a little ol' tyke, I'd pee in my pants just looking at you."

"Some do, I hear."

"Aw, shit, Jack." I threw my coonskin cap on his desk and tried to look mean as him. "I ain't going to do it, and that's that. Get someone else. Get old Bluebelly Ripper. Now *there's* a A-number one hero. I seen him on a magzine."

Colonel Dark looked at me with big, sad eyes. "They don't want a everyday space jock up front, Ash. What they want's a real live wormhead. And you're it."

"Well, I ain't, either. You can bust

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me or whatever. This boy isn't riding in no parade, and you got my honest to God word on it."

I meant it, too, and Dark knew it. In a field situation I wouldn't question an order from Colonel Jack, but this wasn't any field situation or anything like it. And a man's got to stand up for himself when he knows he's right. That goes for soldiers as well as anybody.

I felt like the biggest damn fool on Earth, and likely looked the part. Bands playing and flags flying and paper falling all over — and me riding in a bright red skimmer with Dark and the President and whoever, and enough high brass to start our own little war. And of course our tag-alongs were right close by, his and mine — their pretty red boxes nice and handy. I kept grinning and waving and looking happy as a frog, and Jack sat right there watching, smiling real nice and showing me his fine white teeth.

It was a good parade, I suppose, if you didn't know better. There were lots of drums and pretty costumes and long-legged girls. There were battle trophies and war wagons and even a dead Centaurian in a tank — one of the better-looking varieties. They'd found an old Beta Scout somewhere that'd been rusting out for about ten years and painted it all up and stuck it on a float. Major Bluebelly Ripper was ridin' that, and looked near as miserable as I did.

The worst part, though, were the troopers. I could take all the rest, but that was kind of hard to swallow. There must have been soldiers from half the old units on Earth — every one in fancy dress, all brand-spankin' new and shiny. Jack's Nairobi Lancers were there looking tall and proud, red plumes waving on their big bone helmets. Right behind me were the Swiss High Guards and the Queen's Own, and I could see the green banner of the Virginia Volunteers up ahead, and the Red Russian Eagles after that. And right in front of me, of course, a troop of Tennessee Irregulars, my own outfit. Each and every one in fine buck leather, sporting coal-black beards and coonskin hats.

I didn't know whether to laugh or bust out bawling. What I really wanted to do was hop right out of there and knock me some heads together. Sort of work out the tension, some. Dark looked right at me, once, and I figured he was feeling the same.

The truth is, there wasn't a man there fit to wear those outfits. Not a one had ever been off-planet, and if any two of 'em had been soldiering more than a week, why I'd buy them all the beer they could drink.

There aren't any Tennessee Irregulars any more — haven't been for near twenty years. Maybe me, and three others, from what started. The same goes for Jack's outfit, and the rest. We still come from everywhere, but there isn't much time to think on it,

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or worry 'bout who's carrying the flag. We're soldiers, and we do what we have to do.

Only, like Jack Dark says, that don't make much of a parade. People get tired reading about a war they never see. I guess you got to give them something to look at now and then, so they'll know we're still out there, fighting for home and mother — and pretty soldiers marching by is about the best thing for it. Folks sure don't want to see much more than that, or think on it any. — How we drop a million troopers every couple of years out there and don't get more than a handful back alive. Who's going to do much cheering about that?

There was plenty of noise and shouting, but it sure got awful quiet when I passed by. People looked, all right. They didn't want to miss a real wormhead — there aren't that many to see. But they didn't want to *really* look, not like you look at just anyone. What they'd do is look *at* something else and kind of see me in the bargain. Like maybe starin' straight at me would give 'em warts, or something worse.

I could've done the same. Looked right over them and never seen a thing. I didn't, though. I grinned until my face hurt and caught every one of them right in the eye. Squirm, you bastards, I told them. You ain't sure what I got, but you're *god*damn sure you don't want any....

***

"Marcus, I'm buying," said the colonel, when we were right near the end.

"Shit, Jack, you haven't *got* enough whiskey to buy out of this one," I told him.

There was a ground-hog major sitting up front, and he didn't much like it — me talking to an officer like that. He started to say something, then didn't. Which was a good idea. I wouldn't ever do anything to embarrass Jack, but he's not near as nice to folks as I am.

There was a banquet somewhere with tin speeches and paper food, and we put up with about fifteen minutes of that before Dark got up and pulled me off to a nearby bar. What we didn't drink we threw at the walls, and we soon had the place to ourselves. When we got into regimental songs about two in the a.m., the tag-alongs cut us off quick. A couple of sober shots, and we were ready to go again, but our keepers said absolutely no. Instead, they called a staff car and packed us off fast to Heroes' Hotel. Dark and I protested — but not much. His tag-along was a lieutenant, and mine a captain, which doesn't mean anything. If you're a wormhead, your tag-along outranks God.

Jack went his way and I went mine. Halfway down the long hall, though, he stopped and called out over his shoulder. "Sergeant! Sleeeeeeep TIGHT!"

"Sir!" I shouted back, "Don't let the BAD bugs bite!"

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***

Captain Willie Brander roused the night crew. They weren't too glad to see me, but no one complained. I'm about all they have to do.

Annie See stripped me down and held me under happy juice.

Little Mac Packer scrubbed every hole and hollow with a fine rusty brush.

Bigo Binder glued me up tight.

They dried me and rubbed me and ground me up good, then rolled me in the Sounder. All the little hairs that had dared start growing since yesterday got hummed off quick.

Finally, I lay back flat on the table and let the red rubber jam-jams wrap me up tight. Three hundred thirty-two gold and silver wires dug their little snout noses into my skin. Dewpads shut my eyes and plugged up my ears. Hard rubber clamps spread my jaws so the bright yellow tubes could snake down my gullet. Then, when all was done and checked, they picked me up easy and dropped me down deep in the white foam pool.

I couldn't move an eyelash. Even if I had one.

It was beddy-bye time. But no one said good night. Tell that to a wormhead, and he'll come right out of his nightsuit and hand you your ass.

Another wonderful night in Ash's head. All my good bug-buddies were waiting, and we romped and splashed all over and had us a time. The little white teeth were slice-belly sharp and we gutted each other good. There was hot red screaming, and pink things to eat. We ripped and tore and cut through the long wet hours, and the night didn't last more than a couple thousand years.

It doesn't get better, it just gets worse. Like someone who isn't here any more scratched in the bar downstairs:

Hell is where the good guys go.

Only, you got to be a wormhead to know it.

"Sleeeeeeep TIGHT?"

"Damn RIGHT!"

Dark shot us all a big grin and dropped his ugly self down between Miguel Mendoza and me.

"Pleasant dreams, Ash?"

"Hell, yes, Colonel. I'm thinkin' about going on back after breakfast and grabbin' me another couple hours."

Everyone laughed at that, and Jack Dark reached out a big paw and speared about thirty ounces of steak.

"You got the hungries, Jack?" Mendoza asked him.

"Always do after a good night's sleep, Mig."

The chatter went around the table and back again, like it always does with wormheads in the morning. We're so damn glad to be awake there isn't anything doesn't sound funny.

There were thirty-two of us there, all the wormheads on Earth. Off-

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planet there's more, of course, though not as many as you'd think. The survival factor out there's low enough to be a big dark secret, and so the number of live troopers with kills is lower still. We're the cream of the crop. — Or the worst of the lot, whichever. Men with anywhere from 550 to 900 kills on their record, which makes us too hot for the field Sleepers to handle any more. We come from most everywhere, but this bunch is heavy on soldiers from the U.S.A. and the African Republics. No special reason, except maybe there were more of us out there in the beginning. Everyone's in it, now — every male-child over fifteen who can walk, or crawl some. There'd be plenty of women in, too, if the law would let them. But that'd play hell with making new baby soldiers, and then where'd we be?

I said there were thirty-two of us. There were thirty-three, until last night. Everybody at breakfast knew Hu-cheng had bought it in bed, but wasn't one of us goin' to say anything. What's there to say, that we weren't all thinking anyway?

No one was left except Dark and me, trying to see who could out-hog the other. Jack always wins in the end — he's just got more room to put it than I do. But I give him a fight now and then.

"Jack, I sure want to thank you for yesterday," I told him. "I ain't ever been in a parade before. I get a chance, I'll make it up to you, for certain."

Dark just looked at me and did something in his throat that sounded like thunder.

"I'm dead serious," I said. "That was an opportunity don't come to just every soldier. Ridin' around with officers and all, waving at folks —"

"You just keep talking, Ash."

"Sir, I'm not joking about this —"

"Sergeant." Dark turned on me. "I got work to do, and I sure don't have time to sit here listening to you. However, if you like, I can spend a minute or two thinking up some useful job needs to be done."

"Reckon I'll just freshen up some, then maybe see me some town, Colonel."

Dark looked at me sideways and eased back down in his chair.

"Now just hold her, Jack." I knew what was coming. "I'm a big boy now. Near as big as you."

"You're a wormhead."

"Don't guess I need you to tell me that."

"Sounds like you need someone, Sergeant."

"Well, I don't — and I'm going. Isn't any need to talk about it. Sir."

Jack gave me his ugliest look, and I gave it right back to him. Finally, he just got up like he was leaving, but I could feel him standing right behind me. A big black cloud wondering when it ought to rain.

"Maybe you ought to know, Ash," he said quietly. "Hu-cheng didn't die in bed. He opted out."

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That shook me good. Just like he knew it would. Hu was a good man, and more than a friend. And there wasn't anybody'd tried harder to make it go right.

"Colonel," I said, "I'm obliged to you for tellin' me. But I guess I'm going to have to see me some town."

Dark didn't say anything. I just sat there eyeing steak bones and cold gravy for a while, and when I looked up again, he was gone.

We were right in D.C. and it wouldn't have been anything to get a skimmer down to Nashville. I could have hitched a free ride from the base to most anywhere — or rented my own craft, if I wanted. Money's no big problem for a soldier, if he lives long enough. There's no place to spend your pay out on the dung worlds, and I had about ten years coming, plus enough bonus and time to about double that.

I wasn't quite ready for home, though. When I am — if I am — I'll know it. There's something funny about going back where you haven't been since you weren't much more than a kid. You got this picture of it, the way it ought to be. It feels real good that way, all nice and comfortable, and you don't want it any different. Maybe you figure going back will change something, and if it did, it wouldn't be the same in your head any more.

So I did what a man does in a place he doesn't know, that doesn't know him.

Bars haven't changed all that much. I reckon you could go in one a thousand years ago or a thousand from now and know right where you were. This one was dark and cool and served a good whiskey, and the music wasn't bad enough to bother a man's drinking. That's a funny thing about music. It changes when you're out of touch, but if you stay gone long enough, it comes right on back around to where it was.

Poor old tag-along took him a seat and waited and kept a good strong eye on me. I'd have bought him a beer but of course he wouldn't touch it. When you're shaggin' a wormhead, you keep your cool all the time, and you sure don't do any drinking. So old Willie sat loose, trying hard to look like there wasn't anything peculiar about a man hanging dry in a bar, carrying a little red box on one hip and a big .45 on the other. If he was having bad thoughts about damnfool wormheads who had to go roamin' around loose, he kept them to himself.

Sitting still isn't one of my best family traits. So I laid a couple of bills on the counter and drained the last good drop. The boy tending bar moved up and shoved the cash right back.

"You're not buying any drinks in here, Sergeant. No way."

I looked him over close, catching what I'd missed the first time 'round.

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He was about sixty-percent prosthetic, in all the wrong places. Kind of split down the middle, where the baddies had got him good. Rubber face, pink ears and nice new teeth.

"Where were you, boy?"

"Alpha-two. First landing in twenty-one."

"Shit. I was right next door on that little old mudball, where all the meanies come when you fellas flushed them out."

He grinned at that.

"What's your outfit. Virginians?"

He shook his head and his chin came up real proud. "California Diggers. Second Corps."

"Damn good outfit."

"Was. Nothing much left of 'em now."

I nodded. What's there to say?

"Listen," he told me, "I know who you are, Sergeant." His good eye touched my ribbons and the bald dome under my cap. "You need anything in this man's town, you give a yell. The groundies around here don't much understand why you guys are special. There's some of us do, though."

"I'm obliged," I told him and got myself out of there. He was well-meaning and all, but I wasn't figuring on starting any more parades. About one's all I can handle.

The next spot had a fancy name, all red and gold and old-looking inside, with lots of dark wood showing. There wasn't any big surge of patriotism going on here. Nobody'd ever heard of Sergeant Major Marcus Ash, and didn't want to. If you could handle the tab — about four times what whiskey ought to be — why, you were just welcome as could be.

I would have backed on out real quick if it hadn't been for the girl. She just sidled right up and slid on in, easy as you please. I *could* have left after that, but didn't much want to. She was tall and kind of lanky, lazy blue eyes and wheat-colored hair falling easy off her soldiers. She had that special kind of thing some women carry around without really trying. They know who they are and don't need anyone to tell them.

"Care if I sit? It's okay if you don't."

As soon as she opened her mouth, I learned back and grinned. "Well, if that don't beat all. Where you from, child?"

She looked into me real strong, then came out laughing. "Atlanta, right outside. And you got to be Tennessee."

I slapped the table hard and waved down a waiter. "Nashville, honey, and what are you drinkin'?"

She made it just as clear as could be right off. Worked in an office in Defense, which was about all you could work for now, and wanted me to know she wasn't a pro or anything but

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she did like to talk and have a drink and that was the best way to get to meet people. If we got along, fine. If not, that was okay, too. Her name was Jennie and she was twenty-three and how long had I been in the army and what was it really like out there?

I told her my name and she didn't seem to know it. That I'd been in the army twenty-one years and was thirty-six now. I skipped the last question, but it didn't matter anyway — she was doing a little quick arithmetic on the age business.

"My God. You were fifteen."

"Close to it."

"That's all your life." She was having trouble swallowing that.

"Well, time really flies when you're havin' fun."

"Can you get out now?"

"Could."

"Don't you want to?"

"And do what?"

"Well—" She waved me off into the ceiling somewhere. "—anything."

"Honey," I told her, "I don't *know* anything else. Last job I had on Earth was cuttin' high school and stealing spoons. Don't much want to do that again."

She laughed and kind of leaned back easy, knowing I was going to tell the rest of it.

"See there was this fella run a restaurant down home," I said. "Did a big business all over town, but he didn't much like to buy stuff. He was mostly interested in *selling*. So what he'd do is give us kids next to nothing for all the spoons and knives and forks and whatever we could steal off of somebody else. Hell, he didn't care whether they matched or nothing. Glasses, plates, salt shakers — everything."

"So what happened?"

"So bein' kids, we got ourselves caught, and the judge fella tells our folks they got a new rule on with the war just starting, and we can either go to the county farm for about six months, or join up."

Jennie looked pained. "So you got twenty-one years."

"Uhuh. Cured me of stealing spoons, though."

She laughed, showing me a pretty pink mouth.

"It's the God's truth," I told her and held up a hand to prove it. "Listen, you want another drink or you gettin' hungry?"

She thought about that. "You really want to take me to dinner? You don't have to. I just sat. You didn't ask."

"Know I didn't. But I'd like it, if you would."

"I would. Okay?"

"Okay. Only this is your town, and I haven't got the slightest idea where to start."

Jennie closed one eye. "There're a lot of good places."

"What's the best?"

"For what?"

"Anything."

She stopped a minute. "Are you

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asking me the best place in *town?*"

"Uhuh."

"That's very nice," she said gently, "but we don't have to do that." What she meant, was I likely couldn't.

"Yeah, but if we did."

"If we did, it'd be The Chalice."

"Food any good?"

She decided to ignore that. "Marcus. I don't even know anyone who's ever been there."

"Well, you will tomorrow," I told her. "Reckon I ought to call?"

"You're kidding. For which month?"

I grinned at her and got up and found a phone. Jack Dark was in a meeting and didn't much like getting out, but he'd do it.

"Done," I told her.

"It is?"

"Uhuh."

"Hey. How about that?" Something hit her and the big pink smile dropped real quick. "Look, friend," she said coolly, "if I'm going to get raped in an alley or something, just say so, okay? But *don't* promise me The Chalice first. I couldn't take that."

I laughed and helped her up and we started out. It was the first chance I'd had to get close to her and smell her hair and feel how soft she was to touch. It did good things to me. You think a lot about girls like Jennie out there. Not just the loving part. Laughing when you want to and going where you want and breathing all the clean air you can hold. There are good and precious times out there when there's no fighting for a while and you know you're most likely going to live through the week. You can get yourself a woman sometimes if you're lucky and go off and share army beer. You remember all that and hold on to it. But it isn't the same thing.

Outside we stopped to blink the bright sun away, and I caught Jennie's gaze going past me, over my shoulder, and saw it happen right in her eyes. It might have ended right there. It should have. Only I didn't want it to.

I'd been waiting for it, knowin' damn well when it'd be; and of course the minute she spotted the tag-along on my heels, it wasn't hard to put together. She just stood there, one hand kind of stiff in front of the little 'o' her mouth was making.

"Look, I never should've let us get going," I told her. "Forget it, okay?"

She stared at me, not really seeing much. "You're him. My God you really are. I didn't even know."

I felt the heart startin' up my neck. "Yeah, fine. Well you do now!"

"Hey." Concern crossed her face. "What is this? Listen, I'm sorry. I'm a little — well, surprised. I've never been out with genuine hero before, Marcus."

I studied her real hard. "Jennie. You don't have to play no games with me. I don't know about any hero shit, but I'm something besides that — and

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if you know who I am, you know what it is."

"What I *know* is I got me an invitation to a fancy restaurant from one Marcus Ash, and if he's figuring on squirming out of that little number, he better have one hell of a good reason."

She looked so damn funny, all pouty and ready to spit needles. That wasn't the end of it. We'd have to take it some further than that. But it was enough, for the moment. "Come on, lady," I told her, "lets get ourselves some supper."

There wasn't much talking on the way to her place. We just sat real quiet, enjoying where we were and not wanting to worry it any. I stayed in the skimmer while she changed. Tag-along Brander was up front with the driver, a kid no more than thirteen or so. No, he didn't mind stopping for a couple of minutes — or forever, if someone was paying.

I couldn't see the boy's eyes — they were locked in on some kind of crap under a pair of those personal vidspecs everybody's wearing. Something they came up with while I was out chasing meanie-bugs. You could see folks everywhere doing it — bars, streets, all over. Looked like a whole stumblin' town full of blind men.

I thought about the kid. The draft age is fifteen, now. If there wasn't something real bad wrong with him, he'd be out fighting bugs in a year or so. We were building us a world of children and old men, and nothing in between.

What can I say about Jennie? She came back looking straight and tall and shiny. her dress was all shimmery white — kind of there, and kind of not, all at once, like she was walking in smoke. I just stared like a dumb kid somebody'd handed the biggest piece of candy in the world. Jennie finally started turning red all over and said if I kept thinking stuff like I was thinking we weren't ever going to get much dinner. I told her that had sure crossed my mind, and she said it would just have to *stop* crossing because she wasn't going back to work telling everyone how she almost ate dinner at the fanciest place in town.

Washington raced by below as far as you could see, until somewhere up the way it got to be something else with a different name. There was a river, with the last of the sun making whole pools of copper, and I got a glimpse of some kind of monument and wide bands of green places checkered with white buildings. The skimmer gave a little tilt, then straightened, as the driver got hung in heavy patterns and turned the job over to a computer somewhere.

"We've got things to say," Jennie told me. "I'd kind of like to, if we can."

"Good enough," I said, like I really did mean that.

"You were — right, back there," she admitted. "Some, anyway. I *was*

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surprised to find out who you were, Marcus, and that's most of it. Honest. Only, there was some of the other stuff, too. You saw it and I knew you did and I — didn't know what to do about it. I didn't know because I don't under*stand* it. I—" She dropped her hands in her lap and made little fists. "Okay. Straight, huh? You read about it, but it doesn't ever say much. I know there are men who've been in the war and they've — what? Got something in their heads that makes them different. I want to know and I want to understand only you don't *have* to, Marcus. It doesn't really make any ... difference...."

She just kind of let it trail off, and I reached over and pulled her around. "Hey. Sure it does. You'd be a damn fool if it didn't."

She wouldn't look at me. "Yeah. Damn it, Marcus, it does. Is that—"

"It isn't anything. 'Cept maybe a little plain old human curiousity. How much do you know about what we're fighting? The Centaurians."

"About as much as anyone my age. I don't remember not hearing about the war, Marcus. It's just always been there." She shrugged. "I've seen the pictures a thousand times. And the things they've got in tanks at the museums. I know they're awful."

"Okay. Without gettin' scientific, they're bugs, worms — whatever. About twenty-two hundred varieties, four of 'em dominant. And every one of them meaner than anything Hell's got to offer. If you want to know what happened to me, Jennie, and the others, you got to understand about them. First, there isn't anything even similar between humans and bugs. Nothing. We can't even talk to each other, even if the Centaurians wanted to, and they damn sure don't. Second, and this is something Army don't like to make much out of, but it's true — they're *better'n* we are in most everything that's got to do with fighting. They're faster, better coordinated — everything. And the reason they're better is there isn't anything a Centaurian wants to do but kill something. Us, each other, it don't much matter. They eat and sleep and reproduce and kill. And they do the first three so's they can get on with the fourth. The only reason they haven't whipped us already is a piece of plain old luck. We beat 'em into space about thirty years, and we got us a better drive. We can get there — and they can't get here. Not yet, anyway. If they could, we wouldn't be sittin' here talking about it. We got to kill every last one of them and burn every egg in the system. If we don't—" I ran a quick finger over my throat and Jennie shuddered.

"I'm not telling you anything new, but it's something you got to really see if you're going to understand. What they are, and why, has got just about everything to do with how they affect humans. Only that part's not so easy. Everybody knows about it — but isn't anybody sure what it is."

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"You mean, the thing that happened to you."

"To me — but to them, first. What they were makes 'em what they are now. Hasn't anybody had a chance to do much on-hand studying about prehistoric Centaurians, but they got some pretty good guesses. They had to survive, like anything else. Probably there was something eating *them* a couple million years ago. So they developed something to fight back with. Anything ate a big bug got this — picture, image, whatever, and it stayed with him. Something like a stinger that won't come out. And maybe next time he thought twice about goin' after that particular meal."

Jennie bit her lip thoughtfully. "That doesn't *say* anything, Marcus, not if you just leave it there with images and pictures. It's all kind of vague. Like on the holos, when you were in the parade, only I didn't know it was you—"

"So what'd they say?"

"Nothing much more than they *ever* say about anything. You know — 'One of our brave troopers who still carries the terrible memories of the war within him blah-blah — dreams of Centaurian warriors blah-blah-blah.' Is that like it is, Marcus? Dreams?"

I didn't look at her; I just studied Willie Brander's head up front like it was real interesting. "Guess it's kind of which words you want to use," I said. "It's not something we can come real close to naming, Jennie. The thing that started out bein' a defense mechanism evolved into something a lot more than that. It's a matter of pride, now. Only it's a natural kind of pride, like breathin'. The top baddie around is the one with more kills to his credit. And he's got the wispies in his head to prove it."

Jennie shuddered. "The what?"

"Wispies. Spookprints, psych-shadows, whatever. The science fellas have got fancier labels than that."

Jennie went real quiet a minute. The skimmer dipped down out of traffic, and I figured we were getting where we were going.

"Marcus," she said finally, "it's not the same, is it? With people."

"Well, sort of," I told her. "Not just *exactly* the same, though." Seemed like I was doing a lot of talking to the back of old Willie's head.

I never been many places. Wasn't time to, hitting Earth about twice in twenty years. You don't have to pick up every rock you come to, though, to figure what's under it. A man makes it through about two-hundred landings, he gets a fair nose for the terrain up ahead.

The smell I was getting now was money. Dusty bottle money, all fat and lazy — and they smelled me, same as I did them. I was the wrong kind of animal, one they hadn't seen before and didn't much want to. Bald-skinned and big, suited up black as night. A bright shiny girl beside me, and a tag-

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along behind. It scared the deep hell out of 'em, and I was feeling just pure mean-enough to enjoy it.

Jennie didn't smell anything, 'cept what she was supposed to — crystal and silk and candle-shine silver. She took one look at the table, and the menu, and got the panics. "Marcus! I didn't have any *idea*—"

I tried to tell her what kind of money old soldiers have to spend, but she didn't believe that, either.

It was a hell of a place. There were dead-men waiters all over, men with long, gray-powder faces. They moved without walking and you never heard them coming. When food came out it was all secret and covered, and they'd stand around and whisper real serious awhile, then off one'd go, like a doctor wheeling God into surgery.

I don't know what Dark told them to get us in, but in wasn't eating. They were in no big hurry — we were there, but they'd make it hurt if they could. I grabbed one cruising by and told him we were ready, and he gave me this patient little smile and said he'd be glad to get me a menu in English. I grinned right back and told him I'd sure be grateful. When the new menu came, I set it aside without looking and ordered from the old one in French, Danish, Frisian and a little Pashto. I couldn't see his face, but Jennie could. He wouldn't know more than two of those, and they'd have to run tapes off his little pad recorder and take them off somewhere and get 'em figured.

When he was finished, I stopped him and gave him the look I learned from old Dark. "Boy, you been about this much help, so far," I told him, flipping a U.S. dime on the table. "You get your head on straight real soon, and we'll see about something better, okay?" I took a new eight hundred dollar bill out of my pack and laid it by the dime. He hated himself, but he wanted it, and he took himself out of there quick.

Jennie was eating needles. "That insufferable *bas*tard!"

"Hey, he's just got the sorries, like most everyone else," I told her. "Sorry he's standin' instead of sitting; probably hates every one of these folks and has reason to. We sure goin' to get us some service, though."

"You are not a nice person, Marcus Ash."

"Never get time for it."

She tried a little wine and gave me a crooked grin. "Okay. That cute trick with the languages. Where'd you get time for that?"

I filled up her glass again, and mine. "We got soldiers out there from most everywhere, Jennie. We're all supposed to speak standard Armycom in the field, and we do if there isn't much hurry. You put a man under fire, though, where you got about a eighth of a second to figure which way to duck, your buddy's goin' to say *watch it, Ash!* in whatever tongue he was born with. When he does, I don't want to take no time sayin' 'huh?' just be-

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cause he's Portuguese or Welsh. Besides, there isn't much else to do out there if you're not fighting, 'cept talk. So you learn to do it with whoever's in the same hole. Maybe that's worth a war, I don't know. Maybe when it's over we'll all go back to being just like we were."

The salad came, bright green with some kind of fruit on top I'd never seen before, and a thick white sauce with little specks in it. Whatever it was, I'd ordered it during my big show-off scene, and if I didn't like it, that son of a bitch would sure never know it.

Halfway through the next course I caught Jennie with fork in midair, watching my tag-along. It wasn't the first time. She hadn't got on that yet, but she was thinking about it. Willie was a couple of tables away with a plain glass of water — untouched — trying hard not to look like he was looking.

"Poor guy," she said, shaking her head, "he doesn't have much fun, does he?"

I gave her a real hurt face. "Hey, *I'm* the hero, remember? He isn't supposed to have fun."

"Oh, golly, listen I forgot myself." We both laughed, but she was still thinking. "Does it — bother you any?"

"No. Way it's got to be unless I want to sit around Heroes' Hotel all day." I read her question. "Officially it's RIFETS — Research Institute for Extraterrestrial Studies. Someone dubbed it Heroes' Hotel 'cause it's homebase for troopers with peculiar conditions like mine."

"He goes with you, because something might happen to you." It wasn't a question. There was worry in the tight little corners of her mouth. It kind of did something to me to see it there.

"Hey, you know about the tag-along," I told her. "Something *could* happen, but it's not likely. The wispies I'm draggin' around don't bother you any unless you're sleeping, passed out drunk or otherwise unconscious. I sure as hell don't go to *sleep* on purpose, and we've learned not to booze it up too much. Most of the time. The tag-along's with us for that slim chance you might fall on your head, have a stroke — whatever. He's got all kinds of goodies in that little red box, and he can jolt me full of wake-up real quick if he has to."

I picked up my glass, and she started to say something; then I caught him over the rim, bearing in on us from across the room. Big belly and three or four stars on his tabs — a couple of little ground-hog ribbons on his chest for peeing straight. Whatever he'd been pouring down was working just fine. He was having trouble with his feet and trying to make up for it by walking real slow and serious.

Jennie caught my eyes going small and didn't know why. I stood up slower'n you're suppose to, and he wheeled on over and shot me a big grin.

"Listen, you *sit*, Sergeant." He

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winked down at Jennie, going over her good and taking his time. "I'm the one ought to be standing. Rafe Hacker." A wet hand came out. "I know who you are, Sergeant Ash. Hey, sit. I mean it."

He had it all figured and so did I. If Ash sits, he sits too, and there we go. He plants himself down awhile, then goes back and tells his buddies he talked to a real one. Maybe he picks up the girl's name in the bargain. Only the whole business wasn't going right, and he was beginning to figure out why. If we kept standing, everybody guesses the general's pullin' rank on the hero sergeant. If he sits — and I don't — it looks a lot worse than that.

"Sergeant, I'd be pleased if you'd let me buy you and the lady a drink." His little eyes are right on me and he knows.

"Thank you, sir. Maybe we could take a raincheck on that."

"Maybe the lady—"

"No, sir. She wouldn't."

The eyes don't move but the grin gets real tight. "Sergeant, I've got a lot of respect for you wormheads, but—"

"Sir. That isn't one of your words. You got no right to it."

His face went slack. "*You* are out of *line*, Sergeant."

"No, sir. You are. That's our word. We can use it, you can't. Go out and make your kill and get your gray ribbon, and it's yours. Until then, you don't own it. You want my number, sir, it's 775041113."

The red was starting up over his best ugly smile. He was thinking about what ought to happen next and how he ought to bring me up on charges and all, but he wasn't dumb enough to do it. Instead, he showed me the little pig eyes again and hauled himself out of there.

Jennie was trying to crawl under a napkin. "Hey, listen, you're more fun than anyone. Who we gonna kill next?"

"Sorry. I got this thing about ground-hog brass."

"No, really?"

"Okay, let me go. Peace."

"Oh, sure. St. Marcus of Ash."

We laughed together and caught each other just right for a quick second and held it there, then let it go. It'd be there when we came looking for it.

Outside we got us a brand-new high, breathing in all the good night air. It was one of those times anybody watching figures there's another couple of happy drunks running loose — but to see it different from the inside 'cause you've got something circling in around you keeping all the fine stuff going. We were smarter than anybody and saw things nobody'd ever seen before. And of course *every*thing was funny.

We both knew what was coming, that we were about a breath away from bein' there. We held it all back in the skimmer because we knew we couldn't handle it and didn't want to.

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"Hey, Marcus Ash."

"Uhuh."

"Got to know. Okay?"

"Got to know what?"

"Dinner. How much that huge goddamn dinner cost. 'Bout a zillion dollars?"

"None of your business."

"Come *on.*"

"All right. Four hundred somethin'."

"Dollars?"

"Well, hell, yes."

"My God. And an *eight* hundred dollar tip. Who's going to believe me? What'd you do this weekend, Jennie? Oh, nothing. Picked me up a war hero and we had us a couple of drinks and 'bout four hundred dollars' worth of snacks—"

"Hey, now. I didn't say I left that groundie no eight hundred dollars."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"How much?"

"Half that."

"Four hundred?"

"Hell, no."

"What?"

"Half that."

"Listen, you...."

"Goddamn, Jennie, I said half, I meant half." Scrubbing around in my pouch, I found it and gave it to her. She blinked at it a long time, then threw back her head and howled until the tears came.

"Marcus, what's that — *poor* man going to do with half an eight hundred dollar bill? Oh, no!"

We looked at each other and got the funnies goin' and couldn't get 'em stopped. When everything settled down a little, I told her I had something real wonderful for her and gave her the silver spoon I'd stolen from The Chalice. "Don't look like I learned nothing since high school, does it?"

When she looked up at me her hair was making yellow smoke around her head and there were tiny bright points in her eyes. "Hey." She poked one finger at my chin. "I can't make any words, Marcus."

"Maybe it isn't a talkin' kind of time."

"Yeah. Maybe it isn't."

She slid in close all lazy warm and smelling like girl and said something, and I said *what?* and she said whatever it was again and grinned in closer. Past her I could see the city, and it seemed to stretch on forever, like worlds fadin' out to the Rim until there wasn't any place else to go. If I thought about it just right, all the lights turned into stars, and I was out there again, where I didn't ever want to be. This time the whole string ran out, and the billion-to-three odds clicked back to zero. The meanies holed me up in some stink-warren and ripped me good. Snap-claws clipped me down like paper, and all the little razor feet came hummin' in to peel the wrapper....

"Hey, you're off somewhere."

"Right here."

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"What you thinking?"

"I was just kind of wondering what those little stringy things was in 'bout the umpty-third course — you know? Right after the duck with sugar peaches...?

Jennie made a face. "You weren't either."

"Sure I was. What you figure I was thinking about. You?"

"Well, maybe."

"Huh."

"You were sure thinking about me a minute ago."

"That wasn't thinking."

"Oh? What was that?"

"Doing, mostly."

"Yeah. Was, wasn't it?" She gave another one of those sounds and turned over and propped her chin in her hands, and I leaned back to enjoy the view. We didn't say anything, and she kind of stared out the window and thought about something and then looked back at me again. "What are you going to do, Marcus?"

"About what?"

"You."

She said *you*, but she was thinking you and maybe me.

"What I'm doing now," I told her. "It's a little late to start learning a new trade."

Her head came up. "You mean the army? God, Marcus, you don't have to go out *there* again? They wouldn't send you *back?*"

"Not fighting, no. There's other things."

"You want to do that."

"It's that, or go back to stealin' spoons."

"I'm serious, Marcus." She reached out and touched the little chained medallion on my chest, holding it and turning it in two fingers.

"Sure," I said, "I am, too. The army's not a bad place for a guy like me. It's somewhere I can do some good. If the war keeps on, and I reckon it will, there's going to be plenty of use for a man who's made it through more years than he ought to. When — hey, you listening to me?"

"What? Yes. No, I'm sorry. Marcus, what's this?"

I winked at her and took the medallion from her fingers. "This, is somethin' real important. What it does is let you and me do what we're doing in here without Captain Willie Brander sitting right there on the corner of the bed."

She looked at me without expression, and then it suddenly dawned on her what I was talking about. I laughed and swiped at her hair. "Honey, it doesn't do *pictures* — just stuff like pulse, respiration, BP. Comes through on the little red box."

"Well, if he's any good," she said coolly, "he sure as hell knows what *you're* doing. If I'd known that, I would have made you take the thing off. It's like — peeking."

"No, you wouldn't," I told her. "If I did, old Willie'd come right through that wall, and there wouldn't be no

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question about *peeking.*"

She sat up and stared at me."

"Well, sure. What did you think?"

"My God, I don't know." She shook her head, troubled. "Marcus, you must think I'm an idiot. We talked about this, and here I am asking a bunch of dumb questions again. It's —" She shrugged helplessly. "Yeah, I do know, too. I forget all that when we're — like this."

So do I....

"It doesn't seem important. It's outside somewhere and not in here, and it doesn't have anything to do with us. Oh, damn, Marcus, it *doesn't!*" A little sound stuck in her throat; she came to me quick and held me, and the tears were hot on my chest. "Don't you see? I just want you to *be* here, I want to wake up with you, and I don't—"

She felt what it did to me because she pulled back fast and kind of stared at her hands, like I'd gone all hot and burned her. I grabbed her shoulders hard. "Goddamn. You don't know what you're talking about." I was hurting her bad, but I didn't let go.

"Even if it was bad, I wouldn't care." She just kept shaking her head, not even feeling anything. "If you woke up *screaming*, I'd be there. I'd —"

"Shit." I was already out of bed looking for my stuff in the dark. I could hear her trying to make little noises and feel her movin' all soft-naked behind me, and I shut that out and didn't feel anything.

"Marcus, please!"

I can't hear you any more....

"God, what did I *do?* I want you to *stay* here is all, I don't *care!*" She reached out and found me, and I came around fast and slapped her hard. She made a little cry and fell back. I didn't look at her anywhere else. Just the eyes. There wasn't anything there yet. Only fright and tears and hurt.

"Look," I told her, "you got your belly full of food and some of me under that. You lookin' for more, girl, don't. There ain't nothing you got I can't get somewhere else. You *read* me?"

She didn't want to hear it. She was going to shut it all out and say it wasn't real. So I just stood there a minute, taking my eyes down her slow, leaving dirty where I passed. Then I waited until I could see it happening to her. Like real good glass, coming all apart.

While they snugged me in good and made all the little wires just right, I kept seein' her, only I couldn't much look at her now because all the bad hurt kept looking right back. Jennie, Jennie, I had to kill the tomorrows, or we'd wind up trying to live 'em, and that can't ever be. We *can't* tell folks what it's like inside. We got to say it's wispies and nightmare shadows in our heads. There's kids out there with dyin' on their minds, and not much more. They going to *fight* any better, knowing the red screaming baddies in my head are just as real as real can be?

Shall I stay the night and hold you,

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then, Jennie? I can rest on your pillow with the smell of your hair and the soft-soft sound of your breath — and you can pray good Willie Brander drops me quick when they come and find me sleeping....

Jennie, Jennie, do you see? Old Dark is right, and a wormhead can't be what you want him to. He can drink with all the other fine heroes and think where he'd like to be. But more than that's a bad and hurtful thing....

MAJIPOOR

... is a giant world, settled by colonists from Earth in the early years of interstellar travel. It is a vast and diverse planet, with a population of many billions: humans, the native race of Metamorphs or Shapeshifters, and many other intelligent species, such as the huge, four-armed creatures known as Skandars and the diminutive wizards of the Vroon race. For thousands of years, Majipoor has been governed peacefully by a ruling figure known as the Coronal, whose seat of power is an age-old castle of almost incomprehensible size set atop Castle Mount. For the first time in the history of the planet, the Coronal faces a mysterious and terrifying challenge, in a struggle for power that begins in a small provincial inn and ends at the Gates of Castle Mount.

Majipoor is the setting for Robert Silverberg's first novel in five years, a wonderful science fiction adventure story . . .

Lord Valentine's Castle

THE NEW NOVEL BY

Robert Silverberg

BEGINNING IN THE NOVEMBER ISSUE OF

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"It's this nutsy right hemisphere of mine!"

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Bob Leman's new story is the entertaining tale of Willis Barley, a down-and-out bookkeeper who takes in an alien co-tenant and begins a New Life.

Change of Address

BY

BOB LEMAN

Willis Barley, a bookkeeper, had a beautiful daughter who was the apple of his eye, and she ran away to live in the slums with a guitar player. At about the same time, his son announced that he was homosexual, and his wife, caught up in some menopausal flight from reality, began an affair with a wholesale furniture salesman who wore trendy clothes and a hairpiece. Then the owner of the construction company where he worked sold the firm to a competitor, who sent word that he would not require the services of the office staff.

All of this happened within the space of a few months, and Barley underwent an extreme depression of spirit, becoming at last so melancholy that he gave serious thought to taking poison or leaping off a high structure. Very often, as he sat alone in the dingy apartment where he now lived, he found himself wanting very much to cry, but unable to do so; this added a glum frustration to his other woes.

He began to dose himself with substantial quantities of Sunburst Apple Wine, which he bought in gallon jugs at the liquor store on the ground floor of the building. The clerk there, a seasoned observer of the neighborhood's winos, had prescribed Sunburst as precisely what Barley needed for what ailed him, and indeed it sometimes helped; but if he became incautious and drank too much, his gloom would deepen dramatically, and he would fall to brooding at length upon the way he had been misused and the futility of his life. At such times he tended to lay elaborate plans for his own destruction, preparing scenarios for suicides of such grandeur and ingenuity that they would compel the whole world to recognize how deeply

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he had been wronged.

One night as he sat hunched in his broken armchair, communing with the jug of Sunburst and pondering the practicability of dressing in a gaudy costume and setting himself afire in a public place, his doorbell rang. He did not immediately recognize the sound for what it was; it was the first time the bell had sounded since he had taken up residence in the apartment. When he at length understood that there was someone at his door, he moved with clumsy alacrity to answer the ring. The locks seemed to have taken on an additional complexity since he had fastened them earlier in the evening, but at last he solved the puzzle and threw open the door.

A young woman of the most extraordinary beauty was standing there, smiling at him with great warmth. It was not what he had expected to see, and he simply stood with his mouth open, staring mutely and exhaling fumes of Sunburst. After a time she said, "I will come inside the room," and did so, her movements richly undulant.

"Come in," Barley said, belatedly. He had stepped aside to permit her to pass, and now he stared in fascinated appreciation as she made her way into his seedy quarters. It seemed to him that the most arresting characteristics of Rita Hayworth, Madeleine Carroll, and Betty Grable, concentrated and enhanced in some indefinable way, were combined and amalgamated in her body, so that at the instant she made the first liquid movement he could feel long-quiescent juices begin to percolate briskly through his veins, and he was seized by a prodigious lust, the like of which he had not experienced since the days when his glands were first asserting themselves. "Oh, yes, yes, come in," he said.

He slammed the door shut and lurched toward her, a goatish adolescent pushing fifty. She held up her hand. "I know what you are thinking," she said. "Do not. I have come to help you." Her voice was Jean Arthur and Glynis Johns.

"Oh, yes, help me," said single-minded Barley, bearing down upon her.

She said, imperiously, *"Wait."* Barley stopped. She said, "I have tried to make an appearance that is agreeable to you. I did not anticipate so strong a feeling. I will make an amendment." Barley did not quite comprehend what she was saying, but he became aware that upon closer scrutiny she was not, perhaps, as overpoweringly desirable as she had at first seemed to be and that he had been on the verge of making a thorough fool of himself. He made a valiant effort to pull himself together. "Come in," he said. "That is, have a seat. What can I do for — what can I help you with?"

"Your understanding is backwards," she said. "I am here to help *you*, as I have said. You wish to end your life, but you propose to do so

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in a wasteful manner, in such a way as to destroy your body. Your body will be useful to me, and I have come to help you to terminate your existence without physical damage." She beamed at him, as one who had conferred a favor and awaits expressions of gratitude.

Barley beamed back for a moment, until he realized what she had said. "You *what?*" he cried in horror. "You want to kill me? And use my body? Why, that's the worst — the worst—" Words failed him. Pictures of Clive Brook manufacturing Boris Karloff from charnel scraps flashed through his mind. "You must be crazy!" he shouted. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"Be calm," she said. "Be peaceful. I will carefully explain everything. You should sit down and drink of your Sunburst Apple Wine." It struck Barley as a sound idea, and he did so.

"Now," she said, "here is the explanation. I am not real. I am only in your mind."

"You mean I've gone crazy."

"Oh, no. No, indeed. I will show you. Take hold of my hand." She extended it and Barley reached out. His fingers passed through hers; he felt nothing but air. He said, "Oh, my God."

"Do not be afraid," she said. "I have created this image so that I could speak to you without causing fear. I found in your memory pictures of humans that you have considered to be most agreeable and shaped the image to fit. I would have frightened you very much if I had suddenly begun to speak to you only inside your head. In this way I have broken it gently."

"I don't believe it," Barley said. "I really don't. It's either a trick or I've gone crazy."

She vanished. Barley found himself to be quite alone in the room. Her voice, however, continued: "You now see that I speak the truth. I am only a mind, speaking to your mind. You observe that I continue to create the illusion of a voice, but even that is not really necessary. And now, if you have come to believe the truth of what I am saying, I will re-create the image, so that our conversation will be more comfortable for you. Ah. I see. The female figure I used is distracting to your emotions. Well, then. Perhaps this."

In the other chair sat Mr. Oates, his high-school English teacher, the teacher Barley had liked best of all. "You will believe me now," he said. It was Oates, all right, horn-rims, tweed jacket, and all.

"Well, I guess maybe it's not a trick," Barley said, "but I may be crazy. I've been drinking a lot of this stuff. It can do weird things to your brain. You ought to see some of the characters on the street down here."

"I assure you that you are not insane. I will now tell you how I will help you. You had been laying plans to don unconventional clothing and undergo combustion before an audience,

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which, you believe, would prove a point and cause various persons to feel remorse. I put it to you that such an act would only make you appear foolish. It would also be excessively painful. The mere fact of your death will be sufficient to awaken the remorse you desire, and I am prepared to make your death painless, and indeed even pleasurable."

"You've been reading my mind!" cried Barley, much alarmed.

"Yes, of course. I have told you so several times. Now, shall we begin?"

"No!" Barley shouted. "No! I'm not ready. That is, I'm not sure — I haven't made up my mind yet. Keep away from me! Why do you want to do this?"

"Calm yourself, Barley, do not be afraid," the Oates-figure said. "I can do nothing without your prior consent. I wish to do this because I require a body to use here in your world. It is most difficult to maintain a connection with you by the method I am using now, and it cannot be continued for long. I require a local brain in which to lodge. Since you have decided to abandon yours, I would like to have its use."

"No! No, you can't have it! Who are you, anyway? Where do you come from?"

Oates did not reply, but suddenly Barley found himself remembering something that he knew was not in his memory; he remembered a bitter, sterile landscape that stretched endlessly away under an incredible glare of white light, an angular desolation of planes and edges and points and corners, a landscape hard, crystalline, and unchanging; a place where no line curved and there was nowhere a hint of softness, a soundless place utterly without movement except for an invisible sleet of malevolent radiation. Barley remembered it with warmth and affection.

"That is where I come from," Oates said, and the spell was broken. Barley wondered how he could have felt, even for a moment, any affection for the hideous scene. He said, somewhat shakily, "But where *is* it?"

"There is no way I can tell you," Oates said. "You do not have the mathematics to grasp the concept. Call it another universe."

"Okay, let it go. I don't believe you, anyhow. Nothing could live in that place."

"Not life as you have it here, wet masses of protoplasm. We are otherwise. We are —" And it became clear to Barley that somewhere inside the jagged and razored crystals of that seared waste there were minds, bodiless intelligences without emotion, passing the slow ages in endless musing upon incomprehensible questions.

"And you're one of those," he said. Oates nodded. Barley said, "Then what the hell do you want here? How did you get here?" He had always found it easy to talk to Oates, and the Sunburst, whatever its taste, served

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very well to relieve timidity and inhibitions.

"As to how I came here, I must give the same answer I gave before: you could not understand. Your other question is what it is that I want. I will tell you. A — what would be the word? — a member of us, a part of — it — me — has come here. I have come to take that one back."

"I will explain. It is possible for me to enter into communication only with rare people among you, those few who were by chance born with a certain infinitesimal peculiarity of the brain. You are the first among those few to wish to give up his body."

"No way!" Barley said. "I've changed my mind. The truth is, I'm not sure I ever really meant it. You're out of luck here, I'm afraid. But I'll help you all I can," he said, generously. "I can see that you'd find things a little strange around here. What will you do now?"

"I would hope to persuade you to provide assistance."

"No. My mind's made up. But go ahead, give me your pitch. Show me some more pictures." He giggled suddenly. "Dancing girls."

"Be serious, Barley. This is not a game. You are affected by the alcohol. I have now had an idea. I will tell it to you. I propose that you permit me to occupy your brain while you still remain within it. We will be co-tenants, as it were. It is only since entering into communication with you that I have perceived that such a solution is feasible, that it is not necessary that the brain I occupy be lifeless. Will you agree to my occupancy?"

Barley clutched very hard at the arms of the chair; it seemed to be revolving at considerable speed, and he had a feeling that at any moment he was going to be thrown out of it by centrifugal force. He knew from experience that it was nothing more than the effects of the Sunburst, and he also knew, from the same experience, that if he did not immediately retire to bed he would infallibly find himself on the floor in the morning, whether pitched out by a revolving chair or for other reasons. "Got to get to bed," he said, thickly. "'m little drunk. Could use little help."

"I will help you," Oates said kindly.

Barley awoke in what had lately come to be his usual morning condition: raging headache, Saharan thirst, queasy stomach, and a fine tremor in every limb — a hangover. Today there was something new, however; he was not alone. He hurriedly turned to the other side of the bed; it was empty. He stared wildly around the room. No one. But he knew someone was there.

A rich bass voice said, with a joviality that Barley found singularly repellent, "Awake at last, I see. We must be up and doing, Barley. Make hay while the sun shines, as it were. The early bird catches the worm, you know."

"What—?" Barley said. "Where —?"

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"It is I, your co-tenant. Rita Hayworth. Mr. Oates. No need of visual images now, of course. I should tell you that I have been educating myself while you have been asleep, learning some of the facts that you know. This will, I fear, have been my last opportunity to do so, because your subconscious has quite properly been erecting a partition between us. Would you say that my speech — if I may use that term for our mode of communication — has achieved full colloquialness?"

Last night's events, stark, clear, and now no longer cushioned by alcohol, returned to Barley in their entirety. He found that he no longer had the slightest doubt that it was all perfectly real. He said, "You're in my head, then."

"Oh, yes, indeed. At your invitation. I believe this is going to be a very happy association, Barley. What I have been able to glean during this short period of access to your mind has demonstrated that there is an enormous amount that you do not know, that I must learn, but together we will enlighten ourselves. In no time at all I will have accomplished my mission and each of us will have had his existence enriched. And now you are hungry, Barley. You will have a breakfast of bacon and eggs, waffles, pancakes, orange juice, mellon, kippers, hash, brioche, marmalade, and perhaps other things as well. I am most eager to experience taste. To have senses is really quite a remarkable thing. Now my immediate plans are—"

"For God's sake, shut *up!*" Barley shouted, his stomach churning. "Do you have to be so goddamn *jolly?* And I'm not hungry, and I'm not going to eat any breakfast. I'm going to have some coffee and aspirin and maybe a jolt from the jug. If you're going to —"

He stopped, clamping his mouth. "I don't have to talk, do I?" he thought.

"No, indeed. The two of us can communicate quite cozily right here inside your skull. By all means take your restoratives. We have much to do."

Barley had his jolt and his aspirin and drank black coffee, while inside his head the babble continued. At last he said, "I don't understand this. Last night you showed me where you come from and what you are. And that's how you talked. Now here you are jabbering away like a teen-age girl. Gushing. Is this how you behave back in your rock?"

"Ah, there you raise an interesting point, Barley. Heretofore I have not 'behaved.' The word does not apply. I am now 'behaving' for the first time. I will grant, however, that occupying a brain has had effects that surprise me — for example the fact that I feel surprise. Indeed, the truth is that feelings, as I have them now, are perfectly new to me. And to be quite frank, my feelings are of euphoria and elation. This seems to have resulted in a certain garrulity, which is, of course, a human reaction. In a word, Barley, acquiring this physical presence — your brain —

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has affected the way that I think. And since I am in fact nothing *but* thought, I may say with assurance that I am a changed being."

"Me too, I guess," Barley said. "I seem to be taking this too much in stride. I'm accepting it all as fact and not arguing or carrying on. It's not natural."

"But logical. Perhaps my presence has increased your capacities in that direction. That is of course of great benefit to you, Barley, and not by any means the last benefit you will receive. We're going to make a splendid team!"

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Barley said. He was not even sure that he was being wholly ironic. "One thing, though. Have you got a name?"

"No, no name. Up to now I haven't been an individual, and hence in no need of a label. But I can see that you will be more comfortable if you have something to call me. What would you say to 'Fido'? The name has affectionate connotations for you and, as your friend Mr. Oates once explained to you, it means 'faithful friend,' which I think may be appropriate."

That remains to be seen, Barley thought. How could he know without knowing the creature's plans? "Tell me about them," he said.

"About what, Barley?"

"About your — didn't you read my thoughts?"

"No. I received no message of any kind. Your mind is clearly adjusting itself to the dual occupancy of your brain, and very rapidly, too. It seems to be developing that each of us will have a private area in which to think his own thoughts, and that there will be in addition a common ground where we can converse, as we are now. I think it is at least possible that this common ground will in time come to be a sort of joint mind, in which the knowledge and capabilities of both of us will be combined."

Barley had been a reader of pulp magazines in his youth. "Hot dog!" he said. "A superman!"

"Or at least something superior to the present Willis Barley," Fido said, smugly. "And now we must be up and doing. I have reasoned thus: the one I am in search of could not have done other than what I have done; that is, find a brain in which to lodge. The search is therefore for a human being. Now there are a great many human beings, and at present I have no way of knowing which one it is. But after I have experienced bodily existence for a time, I will examine my own behavior, knowing that my quarry, who of course thinks exactly as I do, will be acting in an identical manner, and under the same impulses. This should infallibly direct me to the proper human."

"Then what?"

"Then I will point out to the recreant the consequences of his absence and direct him to return. It is very important, Barley. You cannot conceive how important."

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"Why did he come in the first place?"

"Barley, it is a thing that cannot be explained at our present primitive stage in communication. In time it will no doubt be clear. Let us now go to have experiences. You must be the director in this matter. What shall we do first of all?"

"Good Lord," Barley said. "'Have experiences.' That's anything from tying your shoe to murdering your grandmother. We have to start with something specific in mind."

"To be sure. My suggestion is that for a time you do anything you would like to do — anything at all. From this I will be able to determine further procedure by examining my reactions, and you will immediately be benefitting from our partnership. Now, what is it you would like best to do?"

"Why, what I guess I'd like to do for starters," Barley said, with ponderous irony and drawing on his youthful reading, "is to become an habitué of posh niteries of European *ambience*, small perfect restaurants known only to the *cognoscenti*, and other exclusive haunts of the elite, where I shall appear in the evening clothes of the costliest cut, with an adoring houri who resembles movie stars of the nineteen forties clinging to my arm, and where I will become known as a man of mystery."

"That seems to be a sensible beginning," Fido said. "Let us go."

"I'm afraid there's a little catch," Barley said. "Where's the money going to come from? I'm broke."

"Money. Yes, I see. The first thing to do, then, is to get money. How is that done?"

"Fido, we could talk about that forever."

"I will read your mind about money," Fido said, "if you will permit me entry."

Barley realized that there was a firm barricade preventing Fido from sharing his thoughts, a barricade that he must unconsciously have been erecting ever since Fido had turned up. "Go ahead," he said.

It was not difficult, he discovered, to delimit the area to which he gave Fido access; it required no more conscious effort than the act of walking, say. He found the fact to be of considerable comfort.

Fido completed his research and said, "You are right. We cannot begin until there is plenty of money, and you have almost none. Gambling, I should think, would be the simplest beginning. Let me make an examination of gambling." He did so, and continued: "We will place a wager on a number with your friend at the liquor store. The number that will win today is 112."

Barley did not feel greatly astonished. He said, "You can foresee things, then."

"Time does not control me in the way it controls you. It is a matter of

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the way in which one thinks. Perhaps you will learn the technique in due course. Meanwhile, let us place our bet."

The next morning Barley collected a considerable wad of grimy currency from the liquor clerk: six hundred dollars in return for the dollar he had wagered on number 112. He and Fido had laid careful plans during an all-day walking tour of the city after Barley had bought the number, and Barley now evinced to the clerk a consuming desire to risk his new wealth on a horse. The clerk, by a fortunate coincidence, happened to know of a betting parlor; and because he liked Barley so much, he was agreeable to conducting him there and making the necessary introductions. He asked for himself only a negligible fraction of any winnings. Barley permitted himself to be persuaded.

By midnight the nest egg had increased tenfold, and Barley returned to the apartment with his pockets bulging. "Close to seven thousand," he said to Fido. "Enough for Las Vegas, I guess. I'll buy some clothes tomorrow and make my reservations."

Las Vegas was a week altogether divorced from reality, a week without days or nights, a noisy carnival under bright artificial light forming a flashy background to Barley's grim attendance upon roulette tables. "No card games," Fido had said. "The act of betting will affect the outcome, so that any action taken on a basis of knowing what will happen may in fact insure that it will not happen. We will play roulette or craps, or wager upon sporting events." By the end of the week all of Barley's play was made under the cold eyes of dead-faced men who were quite open about their suspicions. When he appeared at a table, there was always a delay while the wheel and the croupier were changed. It did not matter, of course, and Barley boarded the return plane with the comfortable knowledge that the U.S. mails were carrying to his bank, for deposit to his account, a certified check for almost a hundred thousand dollars.

"We are now ready to begin," Fido said. Barley was stretched comfortably in his seat, drinking the second of the two bottled martinis the stewardess had brought. "We will settle, for the present, in New York. Money will henceforth be no problem: we will open accounts with brokers and speculate in commodities and precious metals and perhaps currencies. Within a comparatively short time we will have adequate capital to do exactly as we wish. As you wish. We will divide your time. Our mornings, for a while, will be spent at the New York Public Library, where I will learn things. The afternoons and evenings will be yours to fill as you see fit, and I will observe my reactions to what you undertake. Do you concur?"

"Absolutely," Barley said.

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The reading sessions were very strange. Each morning Barley staggered to a reading-room table under the weight of a great stack of books, books that seemed to be on some sort of list that Fido had compiled from a ferociously concentrated attack upon the catalogues and bibliographies. It appeared that his net was spread to capture the whole of human knowledge: science and engineering, history and geography and philosophy, business, war and politics, languages — Fido absorbed them all. Or so Barley supposed. His part was simply to sit staring at the book, turning the pages as fast as he could. He presumed that Fido was taking in all the print; he himself received nothing. And while this was going on, he and Fido carried on long conversations, without which, Barley was quite certain, he would have gone mad with boredom.

The conversations were mostly questions by Fido and answers by Barley. A good part of the time the questions seemed pointless and trivial to Barley; they skipped disconcertingly from topic to topic, and no line of inquiry seemed to be exhaustively pursued. As time passed, however, he began to catch faint intimations of what Fido was doing: he was, Barley came to think, simultaneously pursuing a whole host of trains of thought, many of which might benefit from information that Barley could furnish. But Barley was unable to answer a host of questions simultaneously; his mind was linear: one question at a time. He answered as well and as fully as he could, but they came in a fusillade: "What temperature do dogs find most agreeable? Do you agree that suffering purifies the character? Are paintings more desirable than statues? What is offensive breath? Describe the sensations of sexual intercourse. List female Christian names that you think to be pleasant. Why are not insects considered to be desirable food? Go back, you turned two pages at once. Do industrial workers more enjoy the study of history or philosophy? What is a prune?" And so on.

Barley did some questioning, too, but with no very satisfactory results. He was enormously curious about Fido's mission: why it was important that he take back the defector, why the defector had defected, how Fido proposed to take him back, how they traveled to and fro, what would happen if the defector did not chose to cooperate—he had, he thought, as many questions for Fido as Fido had for him. And it appeared that Fido was perfectly willing to give the answers; it was simply that Barley could not understand.

"Come, Barley," Fido said on one occasion. "Join me on the common ground. We will merge for a moment, and perhaps you will comprehend without words."

He did. At the moment of fusion it was all instantly clear and anticlimactically simple. He knew what Fido was,

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and what he was a part of, and the function of the entity of which he was a part. He saw why the recreant fragment had taken flight to Earth, and why it was necessary—why it was indeed of the most transcendent importance—that it return. It was perfectly plain and childishly obvious. But when the melding ended, Barley found himself much confused. He was aware that he had the answers he sought, but when he tried to think about what he knew, he was unable to do so, and he was almost forced to believe that he did not know it at all. All that remained was an inchoate uneasiness and apprehension.

"It is because you think in words," Fido said. "You understand all of this now, but words have no application to the concepts and so are of no use to you; there is no way for you to think about it. In time you will learn, just as I am learning through your senses."

And he was indeed learning. When the morning's reading ended, and Barley embarked upon leisurely pursuits, Fido remained as avidly curious as during the library hours. He was exploring sensation. "Senses are new to me, Barley," he said. "I must admit they are quite outside anything we had conceived. I would hope to experience every possible sensation. We must continue to pursue it diligently."

"Not any more tonight," Barley said. "We've sampled every dish on the menu here, and the sensation you are presently experiencing is called nausea. You may find it instructive, but I hate it. I want to go home."

"By all means. But Barley, the tastes! The textures! The sparkle to the silver, the weave of the napery! Where shall we dine tomorrow? I think I should like to sample Levantine cuisine. I have read of the spiced raw mutton and—ah. That was a nasty twinge, wasn't it? I suppose we must, under the circumstances, go home."

Home was a penthouse of lordly proportions at the top of a preposterously expensive apartment building. The lobby was guarded by electronic devices and muscular men, and there was a small private elevator that opened only to Barley's key and stopped only at the penthouse; it delivered Barley directly into his living room.

This was a room of suave luxury and elegance, or would be, after it lost its present indefinable air of being in transition. Fido's thirst for sensation included the pleasures of the eye, and it was offensive, he said, to live in quarters where the furniture and decorations did not form a harmonious whole, did not cohere in esthetic unity. He was therefore engaged in selecting new furniture and paintings, becoming almost testy in urging Barley to discard a chair or rug that had cost an enormous sum only a short time before. "It is all wrong, Barley," he would say. "I am surprised that you cannot see it." And, after the replacement had been made, Barley could see that he had been absolutely right.

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But it disturbed him, in a minor way; it seemed to him that it was presumptuous on Fido's part to make esthetic judgments about things that were, after all, very new to him. Fido disagreed: "We have read what the philosophers say about esthetics, Barley, and we have read the critics and essayists, and we have examined most of the art that is to be seen in this city. We have studied reproductions and pictures of all the important art of your race. It would be surprising if I did not have an esthetic of my own; I have simply built upon the congruencies between the reasoning of the philosophers and what your senses have fed me. I am quite capable of rendering a valid judgment upon a painting; surely, then, so small a matter as the furnishings of a room can be left in my hands. Hands. I believe I have made a small joke, there, Barley. Now that is most interesting."

A strange sensation rustled through the area of Barley's mind where conversations with Fido took place. After a while he realized what it was: Fido was chuckling. It went on for quite some time. Fido was, it seemed, enormously amused, whether by the excellence of his humor or the novelty of his having perceived it, Barley could not tell.

"Remarkable," Fido said. "Remarkable. I have a sense of humor."

"It wasn't much of a joke, you know," Barley said. "As a matter of fact, I'm not sure it was a joke at all."

"Well, of course I'm not very sophisticated yet," Fido said. "Humor is one of the things we haven't gone into. But there's plenty of time. I expect that soon I will be making very fine jokes. And, now, let us have some music."

Music was one of the things that they *had* gone into. An expert had been retained to convert a large room of the penthouse into a chamber for the accurate reproduction of recorded sounds. It boasted a stunning array of mechanical and electronic devices, all governed by a control panel of daunting complexity. Speakers in a variety of shapes and sizes were ranged about the room among a complicated system of baffles and reflectors. In an adjoining room were tens of thousands of records and tapes.

Fido had first heard music in the liquor store at the time of the purchase of the number. A very old radio, which had not been a good one when it was new, had been blaring rock music of the most debased and mindless category at the top of its tinny capacity. Fido had been entranced. "Barley!" he said. "What is that?"

"Music," Barley said. "Sort of."

"Music. I must listen to more music."

He did just that. The music room was the first project after the acquisition of the penthouse, and for a time they listened for eighteen hours a day. Fido's taste, utterly catholic at first, swiftly became narrow and selective; a

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minimum of audition had apparently sufficed to exhaust all that was of interest to him in music currently popular, and he quickly turned to the serious music of the Western tradition. And with the best of good taste, too, Barley thought. It had not taken him long to eliminate most of the moderns and scarcely longer to get his fill of the romantics. The music most worthy of concentrated attention, Fido appeared to believe, was classical and baroque, and he tended sensibly to opt most often for Bach and Mozart. The ear was most exquisitely ravished where clarity and reason prevailed and a decent restraint was placed on emotion.

Now wait a minute, Barley thought. What the hell? *I* don't know anything about music. Where do I get off making judgments like that?

But he did know something about music, he discovered. He knew a good deal that he hadn't known before. Up to now he had thought of the coexistence inside his head in an analogy of three rooms, with himself in one, Fido in another, and between them a common room, where they might meet or not, as they wished. He could see now that it was something more than that: there was between them a seepage that went beyond the communication of the common room. His own judgments — made, he would have said, entirely independently of Fido — were informed by a spotty erudition that was entirely new. And he perceived at the back of his consciousness an intimation of the urgency of Fido's mission, a disquieting conviction that Fido's failure would result in some calamity of enormous proportions. Fido had never spoken of this; it simply and suddenly became a part of Barley's knowledge, something somehow leaked from Fido.

He did not think that the leakage worked both ways. He felt confident that he was effectively excluding Fido from his private thoughts. Certainly there was no evidence that Fido's ideas or attitudes were affected by Barley's; indeed, in a number of areas Fido's inclinations ran precisely contrary to Barley's strongest prejudices. Physical exercise, for example.

The matter arose when Barley was at the tailor's for a fitting. He had never previously given much thought to clothes or fashions, although occasionally, when he was dressed in his best and caught an unexpected glimpse of himself in a mirror, he had a moment's uneasy awareness that his clothing was, at best, undistinguished. He knew better than to wear a double-knit leisure suit, perhaps, but at the same time he had never paid enough attention to the cut of clothing to make any real distinction between the various suits a salesman would offer. He tended to dress in suits that were of nondescript color but marked by some odd garishess of design that had resulted from accommodating a jet-set fashion to mass production.

Fido's interest in clothes changed all

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that; Barley could now qualify as a clotheshorse. Bespoke suits, artfully tailored from materials whose rich softness and suppleness were a revelation to Barley, were now his daily costume. Fido had come to take a keen — almost fanatical — interest in such matters as the length and diameter of sleeves, the drape from armpit to hem of jacket, and precise amount of tension a button should sustain. And Barley was not ungrateful for the change; sometimes now he had occasion to feel a flicker of admiration for the conspicuously well-tailored man in the chance reflection before he realized that it was himself, Willis Barley, in a suit that had cost as much as ten of the suits he had bought off the rack.

He was standing in the bay of the tailor's mirror as the tailor tore out basting and inserted pins to effect a slight diminution in the fullness of a trouser leg, and as he stared into the mirror, he could see himself reflected in full-length profile. Fido said peevishly, "That is quite a belly there, Barley. Look how you stick out. The truth is, you are in bad shape. This is the only body we have, you know. I think what you ought to do is start a program of exercise."

"Exercise?" Barley said. "I hate exercise."

"Then I suppose I shall, too," said Fido. "I experience what you do, you know. But it will be a new experience. It must be tried. Then, too, you will look much better without the belly."

Which was true. Within a very few weeks a good many excess pounds had disappeared or been redistributed, and a trimmer Barley suddenly found himself taking a certain pride in his body. Each day, two hours were devoted to flab removal and muscle tightening under the stern direction of a slow-witted young man with spectacular biceps. Barley hated every minute of it, but he came almost to admit that it was worth the torture. Fido had no doubts at all. "We feel better, do we not, Barley?" he said. "A spring in the step, a sparkle in the eye. It is a pleasure to be alive. You are ten years younger than when I first came aboard."

And that was true, as well. Barley felt better than he had felt for a long time. But it was only partly in consequence of the improved muscle tone. Fido's insatiable curiosity and bottomless appetite for sensory experience had opened whole worlds to Barley, and it was clear to him that his new sense of well-being stemmed more from an altered view of life than from physical improvement. Now each day had its goal: these foods and vintages to be tasted, those pictures and statues to be viewed, that music to be heard; horses to be ridden, cars to be driven, and, of late, tennis matches to be played.

"And women," Fido said. "I think it is time to do something about women. I have been waiting for you to get on with it, Barley — I feel what you feel, as I point out from time to time — but you have not made a move. Why not?"

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The answer was complex and none of Fido's business. He had in truth begun to feel seriously deprived, especially since receiving notification of the final decree in his divorce proceedings, but he remained highly diffident about undertaking the pursuit of women. He did not have to remind himself that it had been twenty-five years since he had been up to that sort of thing and that he had not been conspicuously successful even then. During the years of his marriage it had never crossed his mind to detour from the straight and narrow path, despite the fact that the usual opportunities had come his way from time to time. He assumed that he had been able to accomplish this feat of fidelity because over the years he had achieved a degree of success in subliminating his concupiscence. He had had to; throughout their marriage his wife had remained less than enthusiastic about the bed, and when at last her aging glands modified the chemistry of her body so that she became honestly lustful, the beneficiary was not himself but her swarthy partner in adultery.

Those, however, were bygone matters; it was a new day, and the liberation of the spirit that his changed life had brought him had effected a considerable freshening of his libido. But an old man pursuing young women had always seemed to Barley to be a comical and degraded spectacle, and he wanted no part of it. He said as much to Fido.

"But, of course, Barley," Fido said. "Who is to say that it must be a young woman? Make your selection as the spirit — if that is the word — moves you. It occurs to me that at this juncture you might resort to the services of a professional, which would be simple, without complications, and, in the category you are well able to afford, perfectly hygienic."

In the event, Barley did not choose that course because, once he had made his decision, he was agreeably surprised to discover that what he sought lay all about him. He discovered that the environs of the city were from end to end a silken whisper of soft desire, a susurrus of lovely women who, at the peak of ripe desirability, had come to doubt themselves and to yearn for reassurance. The approach of the fortieth birthday shook them with terror; its arrival cast them into black hells of despondency. In their pleasant houses they stared with unbelieving eyes at themselves and their world. They would look at the gangling lout gorging at the refrigerator, at the precociously nubile sullen girl endlessly gabbling into the telephone, and think: Can it really be that I am the mother of these? Is it really me living like this, with nothing more in life than these — creeps — and this house and dull John in his Brooks Brothers suit? Suddenly I am forty and I am not famous and I do not associate with glamorous people and I have never had an adventure and I am old. I want —

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Barley found his first of these at the tennis club. She played as badly as he did, with the graceless doggedness of those who have come too late to the game, and within a very short time they found themselves commiserating with each other over their admitted incapacities and the inexcusable rudeness of the other players who took critical notice of their faults. This compatibility led to a drink, which led to an invitation to dinner, which was accepted. Both knew what the invitation and acceptance meant, and he brought her to bed after giving her a dinner of sublime excellence at a superior restaurant and then gritting his teeth through a couple of hours of head-shattering noise at a discotheque.

It was entirely satisfactory. For a little while they fumbled at each other with almost virginal shyness, but that was a stage that passed swiftly, and then they were at each other with the greed of the starved, and the task was competently carried to completion. And at the moment of climax, as Barley gave himself up to the mountainous wave of relief and mindless sensation, a door whose existence he had not even imagined flicked open for a millisecond, and a revelation came to Willis Barley.

Thinking about it later, after he had begun to tire of Fido's hymns to the glories of sexual gratification, Barley believed that he understood what had happened: Fido had been caught by surprise. The enormous flood of sensation must have engulfed him with such suddenness and power that even that great cool mind was, for a tiny fraction of a second, not wholly in control of itself, and during that instant Barley was vouchsafed his vision of catastrophe.

Something was going to die unless Fido succeeded. Barley did not understand what it was, but he knew with absolute certainty that death would be the inevitable result of failure. And no small death, either; although the thing as a whole was entirely beyond his grasp, Barley had understood great matters for an infinistesimal moment, and he could remember what his emotions had been, if not the details of their cause. He knew he would retain the memory forever: his cringing awe in the presence of something incomprehensibly vast, that had nevertheless been, for a tick of time, within his comprehension; the unspeakable dread of an imminent horror; and a sense that somewhere in wait was a death beyond death and an eternal desolation.

Barley was appalled, shaken, and unmanned. There was no question of further dalliance that night, despite the lady's touching importunities and the enthusiastic urging of Fido, who was apparently unaware that he had given Barley access to a hitherto-concealed part of himself. "What is the matter with you, Barley?" he said. "I cannot fathom your attitude. This surely is the ultimate gift visited upon those lucky

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enough to have senses. I had thought that perhaps the taste of the '60 Niersteiner *Trockenbeerenauslese* was the supreme sensation, or else listening to *Don Giovanni*. I was ignorant, grossly ignorant. Still, how could I have known? Now you say it is finished for tonight, and I am disappointed. I suppose there is nothing to do but wait for the next time, if that is your decision. But it seems to me to be absolutely necessary that you arrange for us to have this experience at least daily."

Barley was able to arrange it. It was, in fact, quite easy, so easy that after a time the chase began to pall. He continued to enjoy his catch with undiminshed appetite, but he found that he was bored with the hunt itself. He took to seeking rarer and more exotic game, and thereby he entered, without quite being aware that he was doing so, the otiose game of Social Climbing. At the beginning he was not even close to the ladder, but he met at his broker's a sprig of a consequential old banking family, and he endeared himself to the young man by sharing with him, on a couple of occasions, Fido's tip-of-the-day. This new friendship resulted in some introductions and invitations, and Barley found himself moving in new circles, where the game of seduction was played under different and — to the outsider — more difficult rules. The whole language was new. He took a keen pleasure in it. The game had come to be almost as important as the prize.

Fido did not agree. "I see no point in this, Barley," he said. "You are wasting a good deal of time. I must tell you that I find these interminable seductions of yours to be uncommonly boring. My initial suggestion that you hire professionals still seems to me to have been a good one. The sensations would be exactly the same — indeed, probably better — and the wasted time might be more pleasurably devoted to eating and drinking and looking at pictures and listening to music. Even to getting drunk, which is a most pleasant sensation."

"Speaking of wasted time," Barley said, "how's your mission coming?" The revelation of catastrophe nagged at him.

"According to plan, Barley, according to plan. It is not a matter that you need concern yourself about. Your function in our partnership is simply to enjoy yourself, to savor the life of the senses. You can be sure that your activities, whatever they may be, will help me toward my goal. Yes, indeed. Now, Barley, I have been thinking: what would you say to a bottle of the '47 Lafite Rothschild this evening? I have been remembering the '50 Margaux, and I would like to make a comparison. The Margaux struck me as being an ideal Bordeaux, but the other seems to be regarded very highly. You'd better lay on a bottle of something less grand for the lady. No use wasting the good stuff. We have only a dozen, and it was sheer luck that we

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found those. And now it is time, I believe, that we select the menu for dinner."

Barley had a staff, now: a cook of vaguely Balkan provenance and eclectic skills, who could produce surpassing meals from the kitchens of a dozen countries; a chauffeur-bodygard, who handled with casual expertise Barley's great Mercedes and variety of firearms; and a butler-valet-majordomo personage, a competent, dishonest Cockney, who ran the household efficiently and at ludicrous cost, skimming off, Barley calculated, at least twenty percent of the total expenses. Barley did not mind; it was only money, and the man's efficiency left him entirely free to pursue his own (or, more properly, Fido's) pleasure.

It was beginning to be apparent that Fido's pleausre and his own were not always in precise coincidence; Fido was avidly bent upon experiencing repeatedly every possible pleasure of the senses, and while that attitude was no doubt forgivable in one who had spent an eternity without senses, Barley sometimes required a respite. In a modest lowbrow way he needed intellectual diversion, which, for him, meant going to the movies or the theater, or reading mysteries and spy thrillers, or playing a few rubbers of bridge. Fido scorned such things, and Barley could understand. They were not sensual, and certainly they could offer Fido no intellectual diversion. "But have at it, Barley," he said, "if it is necessary for your contentment. We should be able to spare an hour or so a day."

Thus Barley for the first time in a long while found himself with an opportunity to think and reflect. He discovered that he remained considerably concerned about the progress of the search, despite Fido's airy assurances that all was going well. The vision of doomsday had, it seemed, frightened him more thoroughly than he had supposed, and he was plagued by a persistent apprehension. After a time he told Fido about it. Fido said, "Barley, I have told you that you need feel no concern. However, rather than undergo your nagging, I will undertake to explain the matter in words, since it seems you will not grasp it otherwise. Please give me your full attention. Do you remember the picture I showed you of my place of origin?"

"Yes, sure," Barley said.

"That was an analogy. It is of course nothing like that. It is — this is really not a matter for words. I will put it like this: there exists in that other universe, in my universe, a — call it a mind. If we call it a mind, we must call what it does, 'thinking.' The universe over there is a consequence — one might almost say a product — of that thinking. Those thoughts are the fabric of reality.

"That thinking entity can in no way be described to you, Barley, even through analogy. It is outside time, to begin with; and by that I mean that it

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inhabits all of time simultaneously. Which is not the word, but then there is no word. This entity is separate from matter and space and time, and yet it constitutes of itself the entirety of all those things. You find this paradoxical, and so it is, when put into words. There is a further paradox: this entity is perfect, it is an absolute, and in this very perfection lies a flaw. Perfection by definition can have no imperfection; if imperfection exists, then perfection does not exist. Imperfection has come to the entity we are speaking of; an infinitesimally minute and inconsequential imperfection, but an imperfection withal, and the destroyer of perfection. Which is to say, that the entity is destroyed, a universe is doomed."

"Not destroyed. Not yet," Barley said, "or you wouldn't be here."

"You are right, Barley. Not yet destroyed. But crumbling. Strange things will have happened. As if, in this universe, the immutable laws were to become inconsistent and capricious, so that the sun suddenly became a ball of iron, and light became as viscous as oil, and time ran backward. Or spiral nebulae began to thrash their arms in tango time. The thoughts of that entity are the physical laws if its universe, and those thoughts are imperfect."

"The imperfection," Barley said. "It occurred when a portion of this entity elected to come over here."

"That is correct, Barley."

"And you are another portion, sent to bring it back."

"Yes. We are — analogy again — very small, almost ultimately small fractions of that mind. Even so, the whole is imperfect without us, and reality is dissolving. If we return to our places, perfection will be restored, and the universal laws will again be effective. And that, Barley, is the explanation you desired, as best it can be expressed in words and anology."

"But — Good Lord. Good Lord. I didn't realize — Fido, you've got to get on with it, we've got to stop this messing around. All that is going on and we're sitting here jabbering about how much pepper should be in a Périgueux sauce and whether Pachelbel ever approaches Bach. Jesus. Suns are turning into ball bearings while we hunt for better orgasms. What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"Barley, I have acquired a number of human traits through this cotenancy, but impatience is not one of them. Our present policy, if continued, is certain to bring us, in due course, into the desired contact. Until then I see no reason not to enjoy the glorious benefits of the senses. You have a puritan streak, Barley, that I sometimes find to be less than wholly sympathetic."

Barley ignored that. He said, "You've never told me how you expect to recognize him when you've found him. As far as I can tell, there aren't any outward indications that you're in here with me, and I don't suppose your quarry's host will show it any more

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than I do. And the mind-reading bit won't work as long as you're in my brain."

"Apparently you still have not comprehended my nature, Barley. I and the one I seek are not separate creatures, we are parts of the same whole. Even though we are insulated by these human brains and bodies, we will be known to each other once we are in proximity. I must admit that I am not certain how close to each other we must be, but have no fear; I will recognize him. It is quite possible that I will recognize him at a considerable distance. We shall see. And the search must go on as before."

"Search" was by no means a precise description of their activity, as Barley saw it. His life continued to be that of a playboy, no more and no less. And an aging playboy, at that, although one with a more than commonly elevated taste in food and drink, he supposed, and music and women. It was a life that on the face of it had no aim beyond pleasure, although he was beginning to see that the pursuit of pleasure could itself become, in a way, high art.

He was finding himself more and more in the company of people who took that view of it, who firmly believed that elegance and manners lent justification to their single-minded greed for sensation. Barley supposed he was one of them. He was able to join with perfect sincerity in their contempt for the international set that welcomed cosmopolitan swindlers whose paper empires afforded them private jets and mansions with revolving beds for a few years, and illiterate thugs and molls of dubious sex who sometimes surfaced from the grimy world of rock music and kindred popular entertainments. Barley sneered at these like the others, but he was not in his heart wholly persuaded that his friends were in fact superior to the objects of their disdain.

His new comrades were an international set as well, but their activities seldom came to the attention of the press; a considerable effort was made to keep it so. They shunned publicity as the plague. They had in common the possession of enormous wealth, the remnant of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, and (especially the Americans) a moderate feeling of guilt because they had opted for play instead of their responsibilities. Most of them had known each other all their lives, and, more often than not, so had their parents and grandparents. New blood was admitted grudgingly and seldom. Barley's entrée had been effected only through services rendered and pressures he was able to bring to bear through Fido's prescience; he was, and to some degree always would be, an outsider. He had been granted provisional acceptance, however, and that appeared to serve Fido's purpose, which Barley guessed to be a narrowing of the focus of his search.

In due course he received an invitation to Korne. It was a triumph, in a

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way. Korne stood as a beacon to the Sybarites, the *ne plus ultra* of their world, and to be invited there was to achieve communion with the Olympians. Korne was an island, a club, and a clique; the inmost clique of a society that considered itself in its entirety to be the cream of the cream. Outside that narrow stratum even the name of Korne was almost unknown. Real society was aware of it, because the Korne group came chiefly from their number, but they faintly disapproved, when they thought of it at all. Among the members of the amorphous group whose pictures appeared in popular magazines, it was a dream, a place that might or might not exist, for which they incontinently yearned.

It was reached by an inconspicuous yacht that put to sea from an unobtrusive dock in an unimportant Greek port. The island itself was a circle of hills rising steeply from the sea, cupping a few acres that were wholly hidden from passing ships. Here stood the buildings of Korne, outwardly nondescript and ordinary, especially when viewed from the air, and inside most marvellously and ingeniously luxurious, the fruit of several generations of pleasure-seeking fertile imaginations with bottomless moneybags at hand.

Each of the thirty-odd members of Korne had a palace that from the outside resembled a hillside village of shabby attached houses; there was an equal number of smaller and similarly camouflaged houses for guests. Barley, on his first evening on the island, left the caressing opulence of the house that was to be his for a month and strolled in the soft dusk across a velvety turf toward the mansion where he was to dine. Fido said, "I must tell you, Barley, that I believe I am approaching the end of my search. I have intimations that my quarry may be here on this island. It has, after all, not taken long to find him, not long at all. Soon now this will all be over. Soon I will never again inhale the bouquet of an old Medoc or hold a woman's breast or hear the Brandenburg concertos. I will remember these things, in a way, but only the fact that they exist, not how they feel. You understand that I will no longer be 'Fido.' I will not even be 'I.' I will be an undifferentiated part of the whole, as will be the aberrant mote that I seek. The memory of all this will be only another minuscule datum known to the whole. And what is tragic (am I not very human, Barley, to see it as tragedy?) is that I will not regret it. *I will not regret no longer being 'I.'* One might almost call it murder, to destroy an individual that way."

"I'll miss you, Fido," Barley said. "I'll miss you a good deal. It's a shame, really, that it has to be this way. But after all, you know, the end of a universe—"

"Never again the glorious gloom of Rembrandt or the homely comfort of oysters and brown bread. Never again old cognac and thick Havana, or rosy

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limbs impatient in a bed, or Vivaldi or Hals or cold Eiswein."

"Yes," Barley said. "Well. Let's take it as it comes, Fido. Remember, tonight we see the Goyas."

About three thousand of the most important paintings in the museums of the world are forgeries; the originals hang in the palaces of Korne. Barley's hostess for tonight had most of the Goyas. And as the walls of Korne were covered with the loot of great museums, so were its cellars crammed with rare and ancient vintages abstracted from *caves* where duplicate bottles containing wine not too much inferior now lay in their stead, covered with duplicate dust. Of the things in the world that are uniquely superior, a great many belong to the masters of Korne.

He was admitted to the mansion by a stately butler whose manner suggested that while he was a most superior person, he was unquestionably far inferior to Barley. Korne's creamy luxury was in no small part a consequence of its hordes of superbly trained, highly intelligent, and (apparently) sincerely concerned servants. The butler led him up a broad flight of marble stairs, and as he followed, Barley became aware of a curious sensation; the leakage from Fido had become perceptible and almost obstrusive. What was being leaked was apprehension, reluctance, and—incredibly—a certain slyness. And even as this extraordinary evidence of emotion came seeping through, Fido continued to talk briskly in praise of the paintings along the wall.

But at the door of the room his babble abruptly ceased, and with it the wave of emotion. A barrier of a kind that had never existed before had snapped into place. Barley suddenly felt abandoned and alone. "Fido!" he said in panic. "Fido!"

"Yes, Barley," Fido said. "What is the matter?"

He was still there, then. Still there, but drawn into himself, guarding against the communication of emotion, secretive and more separate from Barley than at any time since his coming.

The butler passed him into the room. There were to be twenty or so at dinner, Barley saw. They were not, on the whole, beautiful people. By fifty a face has been shaped by the personality within, and most of these were well past the half-century mark. The bodies were carefully preserved, the results of costly regimens of exercise, massage, and baths containing odd substances; but the faces, above the white ties and bare shoulders, had a common taint of selfishness and irresponsibility, of an irritable, dissipated concentration on the self.

All but one. Barley's heart lurched at the sight of her. She was small, with hair the color of wheat; she bloomed like a flower among the sated faces. She stood smiling at a lizardish roué whose obviously wicked intentions

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roused Barley to instant indignation. With some rudeness he broke away from the hostess's welcoming words and began a determined advance to the rescue. His eyes met hers. He melted.

There was a sudden thunder in his head. "Barley!" Fido roared. "Barley! Let us leave this room!"

Barley, utterly astonished, came to a halt. He said, "What?"

"Let us leave this room. Quickly, as quickly as possible."

"What for? I want to talk to that woman over there."

A noise almost like static crackled in his mind. "Please, Barley," Fido said. Barley did not remember his having said "please" before, and he was touched. He left the room and the house and stood in the street in the moonlight. "Now, what the hell was that all about?" he asked.

Fido did not reply immediately, but the emotional overflow occurred again, and Barley thought with amazement, "He's going to lie." Fido said, "Barley, my quarry is not here. I see no reason to remain in this place any longer; I think we should move along to a new hunting ground. Paris, perhaps. Or we might take a house in Switzerland. What do you think?"

What Barley thought was that something of the utmost importance had just taken place and that he did not know what it was. It almost certainly had to do with the lovely woman. Fido's explosion had come at the instant her eyes met Barley's. Was it possible that she was—

But then why would Fido have wanted to run out, rather than corner his prey?

"We might go to London for some suits before we move on to Paris," Fido was saying. "While the suits are being made we can spend some time with the wine merchants. Then we will use Paris as a base and tour France, investigating the provincial cuisines and the various *vins du pays*. And the women."

And after Paris, no doubt Rome, Barley thought. Then the Riviera and the Lido, and all the opulent islands, and anywhere else that the senses could be cosseted. While in some ungraspable dimension a vast entity was crumbling and dissolving; a great mind whose thoughts were the laws that created and sustained a universe was dying, and an ultimate madness was harrying that universe down a long road to death and the end of all things.

When Barley was in the sixth grade he had written his name and address on the flyleaf of his geography book, following a form that has passed down from one generation of schoolchildren to the next since the time of the Concord sages, and perhaps before. The address read:

Willis Barley,
2615 Poplar Street,
Groat's Landing, Indiana,
United States of America,
North America, Western Hemisphere,

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Earth, Solar System,
Milky Way, Universe,
The Mind of God.

There was comfort in an address like that, a sense of having one's place in a great, solid scheme of things. The final, the all-encompassing location was simple truth. Barley knew that, now. But the comfort was gone. The eternal edifice no longer stood changeless and immutable and as governance for all time. Perfection can become imperfect; it can be wrecked by a tiny flaw, by an infinitesimal defection. Barley knew that, too.

He would not remonstrate with Fido. Fido was an individual now, and he had, it was clear, made his choice. Anyhow, it was another universe that was doomed. It had nothing to do with Earth, Solar System, nothing at all. His life — his life with Fido — would continue to slide smoothly along the rich, soft path they had chosen, and each day would bring its meed of pleasurable sensation. Who could ask for anything more?

"I wish we had seen the Goyas, Barley," Fido was saying, "but there will be another time for that. We will be back again, never fear. These people know we belong among them. We have much to look forward to, Barley, as we explore all the ingenious pleasures that have been developed by your race in its short, eventful history. But all in due course. Our immediate need is to put this island behind us. Let us repair to the house and instruct the servant to pack and otherwise make ready for our departure. We will drink a bottle of Taittinger while he does so, and take a bit of the Beluga, since we have missed dinner. We have, of course, ample time. The boat leaves at sunup, I believe."

At sunup. Into Barley's mind came a picture of the humid morning and the red sun rising out of the sea. He would be looking at it very carefully, tomorrow. And not just tomorrow, he supposed, but for the rest of his life. He could tell himself that the odds against it were almost infinitely large, but nevertheless he knew now that it could — just *could* — happen, and he saw that he would henceforth, for all of his days, be watching for a beginning: for time to run backward, for light to become as viscous as oil, for the sun to become a cold ball of iron.

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This fresh and affecting story about a set of very strange identical twins in an Oregon country town is from a 30-year-old Clarion graduate who writes: "I grew up in the Northwest and Southern California, earned a Ph.D in psychology in Michigan. Currently, I live in New York with my wife, who is also a psychologist."

Reunion

BY

DONNEL STERN

I hadn't expected to see them again, but there they were in the library at Reed College, Herald bent over a book of poems and Gerrold intent on a thick textbook. If these people were truly Herald and Gerrold Hayes, under the skin I mean, maybe they would recognize me. If they weren't, maybe they would, anyway. I don't know how far it went. I was frightened of them, and there was also the anxiety of laying myself on the line in front of former best friends who might look up at me with a questioning expression and greet me politely, like a stranger. I just wouldn't have known what to make of that.

My grandmother used to say that it only appears that life in Nottingham lopes along fat and dumb and lazy, like a pig on the run (that's how she said it), that it only seems that way because the lean and strange and knife-edged things in life happen to people when they're alone, inside them, and they don't talk about those things. To my grandmother, a day was a pyramid, and the building blocks of the pyramid were miracles. When I visited her in the summertime, she'd hug me and then she'd say, "Now you just wait here a minute," and she'd go into the house and leave me there in the shade sitting on her old yellow lawn furniture. The paint on the wide wooden arms was cracked with the grain, and the first layers of the wood were split. I'd pick at the splinters. She never moved those chairs, so the grass and weeds grew up underneath, and I'd gently pull the tall green blades that pushed up between the slats of the seat, and the blades came firmly from their sheaths, grasping back, and I'd eat the sweet white ends.

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After a while, my grandmother backed out through the door, bent over, taking mincing little backward steps and holding the door open with her backside. Then she turned around, straightened up, and smiled triumphantly. As the screen door slammed shut behind her, she held aloft a tray with two glasses and a clear glass pitcher of cherry Kool-aid on it, and even from across the yard I could see the sun glinting off the ice cubes, which were still swimming around in circles from her stirring. My mother wouldn't let me have Kool-aid because of all the sugar in it, and my grandmother knew it. It was one of the secrets between my grandmother and I, and we always pretended it was her surprise so I wouldn't have to take responsibility for it. Here she came, walking in steps that were still very small, and grinning all the way. She was tiny and wrinkled and widowed and iron-haired and rheumatic. She put the tray on the slatted table in front of the chairs, poured our Kool-aid, and sat down. She heaved a sigh. Under the circumstances, many old women would then say "Oh, my aching bones" or "My, but I'm tired today" or "I just don't get around like I used to." But my grandmother swiveled her old head on that batwing leather neck of hers, and she looked at the trees and her petunias and pansies and snapdragons and she said, "Well, Mark, all hell's a-poppin'." Then you realized she hadn't been sighing, she'd been smelling the air.

Those years with my grandmother — they were the same years that Herald and Gerrold and I were best friends. Herald and Gerrold — the names are different as well as the same. They could have been Herald and Gerald, after all, or Harold and Garold. Looking back on it, it seems to me that this difference in spelling must have had something to do with Mr. and Mrs. Hayes' uncertainty about how to deal with identical twins. Their compromise seems to have been to use the same recipe on both, adding just a pinch of mustard to one, a dash of tarragon to the other.

Well, Herald and Gerrold were different enough to me. I could never understand how the people of Nottingham kept mixing them up. Herald and Gerrold gigged them about it. "Herald?" a kid would say uncertainly. "No, Gerrold," said Herald, straight-faced. The kid would turn, feeling closed in and suspecting some kind of trap. He'd narrow his eyes and peer through his squint at what seemed to him a carbon copy and he'd say, "Well, then..." and he'd point, "Herald." And Gerrold would say something like, "No, Montgomery," or he'd make a very courtly bow and use a deep, badly accented voice and answer the question with a question. "Livingstone, I presume," he'd say, and the kid would shuffle off indignant and red-faced. We roared with laughter until we cried and bent over and finally rolled on the grass, gasping.

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My mother wasn't keen on Herald and Gerrold. The twins' parents were both faculty members at Reed, and everyone knew what *that* meant. My God, friends with *artists* and musicians and who knows what else? The things it was rumored that they taught their children were only whispered about in Nottingham, because it was not mannerly to talk that way. City people were bad enough, but city people who built incomprehensible glass and concrete and steel houses out in the middle of nowhere — the boonies even by Nottingham standards — *well!*

But there was nothing my mother could do about recess and the hour after school before the second bus came to take me home. While the other kids dashed home to snatch their 22's and get out to the pastures and lie flat in the grass so they could get a good shot at a graydigger when he poked his head up out of his burrow and silhouetted himself against the woods or the sky or whatever it was each one of them had at the far end of his favorite pasture, while they did that, the three of us sprinted down to the Rainbow Grocery and sat on the floor in the corner and read the dusty bejeesus out of the A.E. Van Vogts and Asimovs we found stuffed behind the Norman Vincent Peales on the revolving bookrack. We curled those covers, and we read the best passages aloud, and we pooled our money to buy one candy bar because Mr. Josephson wouldn't let us stay unless we bought something. Once we were reading on the floor there, not too long before things blew up between the twins and I, and Herald said, "There's a reason for reading this stuff, you know." Gerrold said too quickly, "Yeah, to improve our minds," and he forced a giggle and looked at Herald hard.

When it was warm, we went out during recess to the pioneer graveyard in the woods behind the school, and we lay down solemnly on the cool old slabs, which we had to clear of undergrowth, and we closed our eyes, trying to capture the feelings of being ancient and not alive. Or we wrestled with the huge dead grapevines back there, some dream of a vineyard run amok, the vines as thick as our legs and covered with other vines and moss. We wrestled with dinosaurs, ripping the dead old vines out of the bushes, punishing them with our stone axes. We read Pellucidar in the town library, which had a librarian who didn't know who Edgar Rice Burroughs was and didn't know the library had any.

I was brown and strong and blond and athletic and twelve, these characteristics being due to certain intricate interactions between my parents' very Swedish genes, my chores at home on my parents' modern, but very Swedish farm, and the passage of time. I had learned to whistle through my teeth, blow saliva bubbles off the end of my curled tongue, flip bottlecaps so they sailed like the squares of heavy cardboard we used for flying saucers, and

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wiggle my ears. Herald and Gerrold could do none of these things. Their hair was clipped short, crewcut-style, and was more white than blond. The hair style made it perfectly obvious that their heads, round and moon-like, heavy with brains, were at risk on their stalk-like necks. They did not run well. We all dreamed of and talked surprisingly openly about Gayla Stamberg, who was beautiful, everyone's sweetheart, and hopelessly out of our reach.

Gayla disdained to mar her beauty with grease paint and loud clothing. So she did not participate in Nottingham's annual parade. Imperiously, she reviewed the parade from the front yard of her house, on Franklin Lane, and she nodded and smiled, regal in every way, at those paraders of whom she particularly approved. As might be imagined, all the boys of the seventh grade (and the eighth, too, I wouldn't be surprised) drew ourselves up to our full heights when we passed Gayla. We grinned. We strutted. If for no other reason than to compete for Gayla's love, the parade would have been vitally important.

The parade was a highlight of Nottingham's Robin Hood Festival, an annual affair jointly sponsored by the Nottingham Chamber of Commerce, the Nottingham Book Club and Bridge Sorority, the Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, the Nottingham Kiwanis, the Nottingham Boy Scouts, the Nottingham Girl Scouts, the Nottingham 4-H Club, and also by the few loners in Nottingham who didn't belong to anything. There were elkburgers and green felt Robin Hood hats with long pheasant feathers which were anchored by their quills in a slot in the felt. There was a Ferris wheel. There was a salt-and-pepper shaker, which inevitably dislodged several elkburgers from dizzy stomachs. There were booths where you won stuffed animals and green glass ashtrays if you could pop so many balloons with your darts or if you could knock over so many lead milk bottles with a softball or if you could toss so many black rubber rings (gaskets borrowed from Dale Lane down at Western Auto Supply — eventually, they would find their way into cars) over the mouths and necks of the 7-Up bottles massed together in the middle of the booth. There were flags snapping in the breeze and riflery contests and archery contests. There were tractor pulls. There was livestock judging.

On the first night of the festivities, the most beautiful girl of Nottingham High School was crowned Maid Marian, and then she took a spin on the Ferris wheel. The band struck up "Roll Out the Barrel," and she was alone up there, glorious, and she waved her white-gloved hand, and every man, woman, and child of Nottingham waved back at her. There was a spotlight that followed her around, and now and then it flashed in her eyes so she'd have to shield them. Unashamedly, standing there on the 50-yard line of

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the Nottingham High School football field, her parents wept for joy.

The parade took place on the second day. Its main interest lay in the competition for Best Float, Best Costume (Junior Division), and Best Costume (Senior Division). It was quite the thing to win a trophy; people talked about it all year. This year, Red Lund himself, an appearance on whose cowboy TV show, broadcast from Portland, catapulted any child into instant Western Oregon stardom, Red Lund himself had consented to be Grand Marshal and would therefore award the trophies.

This meant that if you won, you were going to be able to walk right up to Red Lund and shake his hand. The big time. Who could know, maybe even the Portland papers would be there?

Herald and Gerrold and I had managed stay-over nights for a long time. This we accomplished through the beneficent and impudent intervention of my grandmother. (Note: stay-over nights constitute a particular type of ecstatic experience much sought after by children in rural areas, who are only allowed to spend long, uninterrupted periods of play under these conditions. A cardinal feature of the experience is long-winded discussion, usually lasting well into the night, which is conducted in soft tones from underneath bedcovers.)

Under pretense of a visit to her house, my grandmother would pick me up and drive me out to the Hayes's house. It was another one of our secrets. I'd offhandedly mention something like, "Well, the ol' treehouse sure needs some work," and she'd pick it up from there. "Mark Swenson, you indolent child," she'd say, mimicking her own cross self, which was at times very real, especially when my mother talked about her conservative ideas of child rearing. ("Clarissa," said my grandmother, for she had saddled my mother with a lulu, "where in heaven's name did you learn *that*?") My grandmother went on to me, "Why, you basky little horntoad, if your treehouse needs work, then you must work on it. I won't have my grandson turning into a little blond gadfly who ignores work when it's there to be done." And she laughed gleefully. I must admit from the vantage point of years that my parents' nearly constant irritation with my grandmother was not unmerited, particularly since I'm sure it was clear to Mother and Father that Grandmother had the drop on them as far as I was concerned. Grandmother was a guerrilla soldier in the war of love, and I'm afraid her insurrection forever deposed unreasoning belief in authority from its seat in my soul. (Don't let that sound too heroic: it causes problems.)

On that last Friday afternoon I spent with Herald and Gerrold, my grandmother picked me up after school. She drove me out there to the

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Hayes' house, which she liked because she felt it was ahead of its time and because each time she visited, she was offered a glass of wine.

In the kitchen, Herald and Gerrold and I stuffed a shopping bag half full of oranges and apples and marshmallows and nuts and sandwiches. Since I was the biggest, I carried the bag along with my own sleeping bag (which grandmother had picked up for me, ostensibly for use on her living room floor). Herald and Gerrold carried their own sleeping bags. We went out the back door and into the tall grass. The field had been a pasture. The huge studio, full of rock and metal and canvas and paint and finished pieces, and lit by ten-foot windows, had been a barn.

A hundred feet into the forest was a glen nearly surrounded by brambles, and in this glen was a single massive tree. High in this tree was the treehouse, which had been constructed with scrap lumber we had dragged down the hill the previous summer. We had also built a ladder by nailing pieces of one-by-four into the pole at appropriate intervals.

We threw our bundles onto the ground in the clearing beneath the tree and spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening exploring in the woods and gathering firewood. We believed that the intricate worm-markings in the wood of a rotten log we came across were the written record of Indian life. Awed, in the twilight on the way back to the treehouse, we spoke in whispers. I had no reason to feel that today was different than any of the others we had spent together. Perhaps the twins had let themselves forget about it.

We sat on the ground in the clearing, eating without talking in what I thought was the silence of easy companionship, but I suppose that by this time Herald and Gerrold were trying to think of what to say to me. Later, when I realized this, I felt even more estranged from them.

"Well," I said, stuffing waxed paper into the shopping bag, "let's go up and lay out our bags and then let's start the fire."

Herald and Gerrold looked at each other. Herald sighed. "There's something we've got to tell you," he said solemnly.

"What?" I was a little frightened by the sadness in his voice.

Herald began to speak, but Gerrold interrupted and said, "Just go up."

I stood up, but they didn't look at me and I could see they weren't coming. I climbed the ladder.

High in the tree, I turned, holding onto a branch. In the shadow cast by the tree, I could pick them out below me only when they moved. They weren't speaking.

The treehouse was a good one. We were very proud of it. It had walls and a roof and two windows. The windows were set into opposite walls on the side of the house nearest the trunk. We had nailed a long board over the

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sills of the windows, so that it stretched between them. This was our seat. At equidistant intervals along the board, nailed at an angle to the wall, there were three pieces of plywood, the backs of our chairs. We sat in the chairs, yes, but they were more than merely functional: they were a roster of membership, a sign to all of us that this treehouse was built *for* three certain people *by* three certain people. Call the chairs a symbol of our blood brotherhood, our club, which we never even thought of formalizing because it would have been corny.

The inside of the treehouse was so dark I could hardly see, but it was easy enough to pick out what they'd wanted me to notice. I sat for a long time on the floor.

The moon rose. I could see it through the window, nearly full, and its light was so bright that I could see it playing over the leaves outside as they shifted and swayed in the breeze. I got up and tested the fourth chair. It had not been thrown together; if anything, it was sturdier than the others. It was right by the window, squeezed into the space between the wall and the first chair, and in the moonlight its unweathered blond wood was white.

I didn't want to go down. It would be worse, though, if they had to come up after me. So I did go down. Only when I jumped from the last rung of the ladder to the ground did they look up.

"You see," said Herald in a dead tone, as if he'd rehearsed the feeling right out of it, "we've met these people who want to talk a lot, and they thought the treehouse was the best place."

"We've been spending a lot of time with them," said Gerrold.

"Fine," I said, but I didn't think Gerrold had really needed to say that.

I couldn't see their faces, and so I supposed they couldn't see mine.

"And we can't tell you about them," said Gerrold. There was a short silence, and he added, "We're sorry."

"We are, really," said Herald. "I wish we could tell you everything."

"Oh, forget it."

In the evening, the insect hum grows loud in those woods, tumultuous, and I absorbed it mindlessly, following the rhythmic rise and fall. I wanted to go away, but I had nowhere to go, and I wanted to know more, but I wasn't about to show it. But that didn't work.

"How old are they?" I said, and I was appalled at the softness of my voice. There was something aged about the twins' manner and something adult about their secrecy, as if these talks in the treehouse had little to do with Gayla or mud dams in the creek, things like that. I would have felt better if the two new friends were older. Even thirteen, fourteen. That I could have understood.

"I don't *know*," said Herald, seemingly startled.

The night was clear, the kind of

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night that vibrates with sounds like a tuning fork, and in our embarrassed silence we heard the beginnings of a commotion from the direction of the Hayes' house. Doors slammed, and there was shouting. As the clamor moved down the hill in the dark, voices peeled off from the noise and became recognizable, first the loud ones and then the voice of my mother.

I decided to be a hobo for the parade. I dirtied my face with burnt cork, giving the impression, I hoped, that I had just hopped off a freight, on top of which I had been forced to breathe the black smoke that eventually worked its way into my pores. I persuaded my father to let me carry between my teeth a half-smoked cigar, borrowed from him a wrinkled old black suitcoat which was hopelessly out of style, cinched around my waist with a length of rope the folds of an old pair of his slacks, the kind that billow in the rear, rolled up the pants cuffs, pulled a holey T-shirt over my head inside-out and backwards for the effect and also because the choicest holes were on the back, and put on a pair of my father's wing tips, which positively flopped as I shuffled along with my toes arched to prevent myself from stepping right out of the things. At the last minute, to complete the look, I swiped one of the old fedoras that had been gathering dust for years on the top shelf of the front closet. I was perfect.

The day before, I had gone down to the Rainbow Grocery after school (not with Herald and Gerrold) and picked up my single store-bought accessory, three of those five-foot cellophane packages of lollipops. I was to be a benevolent hobo.

Usually, the kids were assigned the spot in the parade directly behind the Nottingham High School Band. What with the marching of the band and the Sousa beat, most of the kids ended up stepping along like painted soldiers, their anxiety about being on display being compatible with a wooden expression and a martial gait. There were goose-stepping princesses with tiaras from the dime store, ranks of cowpokes in Prussian lock step, a single file of little girls in Oregon Centennial bonnets and long dresses pulling ribboned puppies behind them in red wagons, solemn, Brylcreemed little boys pedaling bicycles and toy tractors festooned with crepe paper.

There had never been a hobo. But that wasn't my only innovation. I danced clumsily back and forth across the street, paying no attention to the band, raising my eyebrows in a way I thought was comical, tipping my fedora to adults, and — here was the clincher — distributing lollipops to the babies who stood with their parents along the parade route, too young to enter.

I was magnificent. I was a sensation. As I approached the people on the street, I was greeted by a round of

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applause and the fat, grasping hands of the little children, who had seen my act coming down the street. By the time I passed Gayla on Franklin, I was lost in my performance, and I think I wowed her. She clapped and waved, producing in me a curious sensation, partly embarrassing and wholly rapturous.

Herald and Gerrold, though, were better. At least everyone thought they were Herald and Gerrold. They wore green pajamas, the kind that have wide elastic bands at the ankles and wrists. On their heads each had a yellow mop. Hair? Over their faces they had rigged translucent screens of tissue paper, and from behind these flashed a red light at regular intervals. They must have carried batteries, but I can't imagine where they were. I don't even know how they could see to walk down the street.

It was their manner, though, that brought it off. Believe it or not, they weren't funny in those get-ups. Not a bit. They didn't march like the others and they weren't frantic and dizzy like me; they simply walked as if they were dignitaries. There was that same aged something about them. When they passed, walking right behind me, the laughing stopped and there was quiet.

I didn't know until later that these two couldn't have been Herald and Gerrold. It was customary for the kids who were old enough but hadn't put together a costume for one reason or another to walk at the end of the parade. They waved at the crowd and had a good time, but they weren't in the competition.

That's where Herald and Gerrold were.

We reached the football field at the high school in a banging of drums and a shower of crepe paper. The floats had begun to shed alarmingly. There the parade came to pieces, and the paraders dispersed to the elkburger stands and game booths. The celebration was not yet full blown, though, because we were all waiting for the judges' decisions.

I spent a dime at the ring toss and was wandering around, just looking, when I noticed Herald and Gerrold, who I had thought to be in the pajama costumes, walking under the bleachers with the two kids who *were* in the pajama costumes.

I followed them, keeping out of sight because I didn't want Herald and Gerrold to think that I'd seek them out after what had happened.

In the twilight under the bleachers, the two kids in the pajama costumes took off their pajamas. Beneath them, they wore jeans and T-shirts. They must have been hot during the parade. That didn't occur to me until later, though, because these two were also Herald and Gerrold.

There were two Heralds and two Gerrolds.

The Herald who hadn't worn a costume said, "What more proof do you need? Will you go?"

Given what happened a minute or

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two later, the twins holding the costumes they had just removed had to be the Herald and Gerrold I knew. It was this Herald who said worriedly, "We're still not sure. We didn't know you were coming here. I don't think you should have."

"It's not so surprising that you're still uncertain," said the other Herald. "After all, nothing we can tell you in words...." This other Herald trailed off and seemed to be groping for meaning. "Well," he said simply, "you just don't have any way to know what to expect," and he made a wide gesture at the underside of the wooden seats above us. I thought of what Herald had said that day when we were sitting there in the drugstore next to the book-rack, and I thought of how Gerrold had seemed anxious to hush him up. I understood immediately. This sweep of the arm had not been meant to indicate the bleachers — they were just in the way.

"But," added this other Herald soberly, "you've got to make up your minds before long."

Gerrold, who was still wearing his yellow mop, said, "Well, I've got to hand it to you. You're much better as us than we are as you."

(Incidentally, if I understood this remark, none of us — the twins and I — should have had a chance at the trophy for Best Costume.)

"That's just the point!" said the other Gerrold excitedly. "You would have told us not to come, but we pulled it off in front of everyone. It's going to work! Nobody will know!"

At that moment, Gerrold-of-the-yellow-mop noticed me. Open-mouthed, he pointed, and one set of twins, the set without costumes, looked very wild, gestured helplessly, and vanished.

"My *God*," breathed my mother from behind me. She had come searching for me. Only now did I hear the amplified and slightly annoyed voice of the parade announcer: "Mark Swenson, where are you? Mr. Lund is waiting."

Of course, it soon became impossible for the Hayes to live in the same vicinity as my mother. They must have been reluctant to leave their house and studio. Several days after they had gone, my grandmother took me aside. "I am contrite," she said. "I have shown you a path which seems to be leading in a direction your parents do not wish you to go." She cocked her head and eyed me through a squint. "However," she said, "the damage is probably already done." She took me out to the treehouse, and we thrashed around in the ferns and bushes, looking for scorchmarks in the earth. We didn't find any. I showed her the Indian writing on the rotten log. She liked it. She didn't tell me what it was. When she died, she left me everything she had.

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So grandmother's generosity (and my defiance of my parents' wishes in the matter) is how I was able to attend Reed. Here I was in the library, and over there, only a few feet away, were Herald and Gerrold Hayes, studying hard. I was still frightened, but I did approach them, very cautiously, and I touched one of them on the shoulder. He turned.

"Are you...Herald?" I said softly, meaning something much more basic.

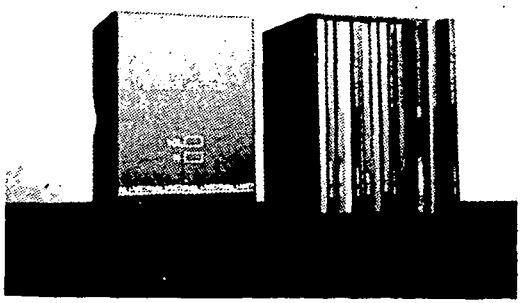
He gazed at me intently and frowned, seemingly puzzled. "No, Gerrold," he said.

But the second twin, having closed his book of poetry, smiled at me slyly and said, "Livingstone, I presume?"

We began to giggle quietly, all three of us, but we couldn't hold it and we exploded into shrieks and bellows.

They kicked us out of the library. That's a small example of what I meant when I said that there were also disadvantages in what my grandmother taught me.

We went for pizza. Herald and Gerrold bit off pieces of the stuff, chewed with the ease of a lifetime, and swallowed without giving it a second thought. I didn't take that to mean much, though.



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Films

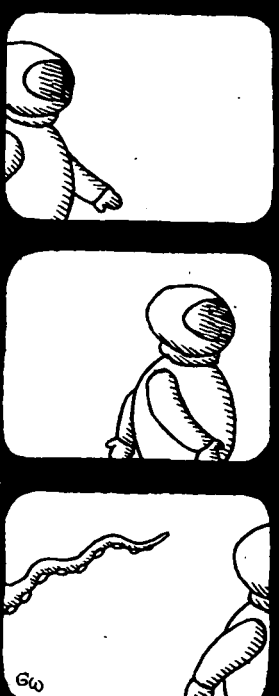
BAIRD SEARLES

In Short, Superman

OK. OK. OK. There's this movie called *Superman*. And not since *King Kong* has there been such an amount of verbiage inspired by a film — or a film's publicity department. This leads a humble reviewer to some despair; what more is there to say?

In the case of *Superman*, precious little. Its special effects are pretty good, but as I've said *ad nauseum*, special effects do not a good movie make. So that leaves the content. Ho hum, indeed. As science fiction, with which this column is presumably concerned, it's pretty primitive stuff, about the level of the old movie serial. As a multi-million dollar celebration of a comic strip, it's something else, but so far as I'm concerned, we're *not* concerned with comics here.

There's literally nothing more to say.



And now for something completely different ... I'm not going to talk about a movie, but a piece of technology just now reaching the mass market which I think is of great interest to the science fiction and fantasy film buff. It is the VCR, or video cassette recorder, and s/f people, who seem to be collectors by definition, are soon going to be coping with the collecting of films, something which up to now has only been possible with great expense and difficulty.

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I've had thoughts on this because I acquired a VCR about 5 months ago. I am not a techie type; this report will have nothing to do with the technology involved, but the social and psychological ramifications of acquiring old movies that I've run into.

It all *seems* simple, and particularly at that moment when you feel like watching television and there is nothing *on* television and you mutter (if you're like me, mainly an old movie fan, not a made-for-TV fan), "God, I wish there were a good movie on" and it's then you start thinking VCR.

So you acquire one, and then set out to build a library. Now this involves two things: first and foremost, expense, and then some effort, mental if not physical. And there are two ways of acquiring properties: recording them off broadcast TV, and buying them pre-recorded.

As for expense, a blank video tape will run you somewhere under $20. A pre-recorded tape can be anywhere from $45 to $75, depending on the length of the movie (except for pornography, which for the most part is shockingly expensive so far, somewhere over $100 a cassette).

There's no effort involved in buying a pre-recorded tape, of course, and the quality is always superb. However, the selection is pretty limited, and despite acquiring quantities of mail order catalogues and keeping an eye on some pretty good local retail outlets, I haven't noticed any great flood of new releases. (The legal and marketing complications are horrendous; more on that later, if there's space.) Most of the s/f and horror movies available are of the level of *Astro Zombies;* there are about five major and/or good genre films available, only one of which I've bought. That's *The Thing.*

So then there's recording off the air. Firstly you are at the mercy of what your local stations might program (and mine don't take requests), so you eagerly scan *TV Guide* weekly. Then you're at the mercy of your reception — what you get is what you record, and thank your stars if you have cable. (I don't, dammit.)

Here's where the effort comes in: physical in getting the bloody thing tuned in, mental in figuring out what to put on which tape. An average *uncut,* late night film goes about 2½ hours with commercials (they stay in unless you have a pause control; riding that means being constantly alert for upcoming commercials and backcoming film). On a four-hour tape, that leaves you an awkward hour-and-a-half, only to be filled with a very short Marx Brothers or some such.

Then we get into subtler matters. Do you watch while you record? For me, an old movie should be a social event; I am never happier than when sharing a wonderful old flick, either with someone else who knows and loves it, or with someone appreciative who has never seen it. (Reservations may be requested, but applicants will

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be carefully screened for high mental, social and physical qualifications.) In fact, one of the reasons I got the VCR was to be able to capture good films at their almost invariable broadcast time of 2 a.m. (*not* a visiting hour generally *chez nous*) to be able to show them when I could lure people over. To get back to the original question, that means I usually have to resist the temptation of watching as I record.

Then an even subtler question. What do you record to preserve for the library? You literally have to extrapolate what you might want to see in a year or so. Some movies I loved (or thought I loved), I discovered I was perfectly happy to have show up at random in the TV schedule. Some I never thought of as favorites I realized I wanted to be able to see when I wanted to see them. A mysterious process indeed.

As for other much touted aspects of the VCR: automatically recording when you're out (either of the house or asleep) has usually worked well on my machine, but be warned that if your TV is in your sleeping area, as mine is, it will be on while recording, though the sound can be turned off. As for watching one channel while recording another, it works *only* if you have cable, or if your antenna setting is good for both channels.

And finally, a question for you readers into cultural extrapolation. What *will* the VCR do to home entertainment? As I said above, the legal and marketing complications go on forever. Just one example, very important to us whose passion is old films. Will this be the end of them on TV, if potentially everyone will have access to them? And what about the videodisc, which I haven't touched on because you can't record with it, a vital disqualification in my *modus operandi*? Tune in in 5 or 10 years for the answers to these and other enthralling questions.

THE UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT

I've never seen a UFO.
I hope I never see one.
But I can tell you this is so:
I'd rather be than see one.

—*Tom Disch*

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The off-trail setting for this gripping variation on a classic fantasy theme is with the Tartars and the Cossacks of the Russian steppe. It is Susan Petrey's first fiction sale. The author writes: "I am a medical technologist with a degree in microbiology from Oregon State University. I am currently studying Russian and Turkish languages at Portland State University. I play the mandolin in my spare time and I have a pet boa constrictor named 'Baby.'"

Spareen Among the Tartars

BY

SUSAN C. PETREY

When the Tartar herdsman came to pay him, Spareen the Varkela was sitting before the fire outside his tent, chopping root of Valerian to make one of his medicinal infusions. Evening darkened the east, but the western sky still held a hint of sunset. He watched as the Tartar, with baggy trousers flapping in the wind, approached on horseback over the short grass of the Russian steppe.

I hope they've sent a healthy one, he thought, and I hope this payment will be enough for me this month. But he knew that it wouldn't.

"I've come to pay you for the healing of one of my kinfolk," said the dark-skinned Tartar, dismounting and tying his horse to a tent stake.

Spareen smiled carefully, hiding his partially retracted teeth behind closed lips. But for his teeth, he looked human. He noticed that the Tartar eyed him nervously. They always feared him, though he was only one among so many of them.

"Don't worry," said Spareen, "we never take too much."

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He led the man into the tent and motioned for him to sit on the Turkish rug. Then he began to sing softly in the old tongue, as he usually did before taking his rightful fee. The glazed expression in the Tartar's eyes told him his song was effective. He rolled up the sleeve of the man's musty tunic and felt for veins with probing fingers. When he found the proper vein, he placed his mouth to it. His thin, hollow blood-teeth punctured the skin and drew sustenance into his blood-starved vessels.

He counted silently as the warmth flowed into him, and when he had reached the proper number for a scant half-cupful, he withdrew his teeth and licked at the small punctures with his pink doglike tongue.

"A little will suffice for now," he thought. "It never pays to be greedy." He clapped his hands and the Tartar came out of the trance.

"You've paid," said Spareen. "You can go home now."

"So quickly?" exclaimed the Tartar, owl-eyed. "And it didn't even hurt at all." He followed Spareen out of the tent and untied his horse, which was tugging vigorously at a clump of yellow lady's-bed-straw.

As he watched the Tartar ride away into the rolling hills of the steppe, Spareen could still feel the pain of unsatisfied need, and it worried him. A small quantity, approximately two pints per month, was necessary to his survival, but he was new in this territory and finding subscribers to his medical services had been difficult. He had had an easy time of it, living with his father, who had a thriving practice among the Kalmuck nomads.

"Well, I suppose now I shall have to go out and hunt up a little vet work to make ends meet," he said and ducked back into the tent to gather up his saddle and his herbs.

Spareen could cure a horse of lameness in one day, his big fingers massaging blood into bruised joints or applying a strong-smelling poultice to a damaged fetlock. His healing touch worked better on animals than on humans. When the nomads of the steppe needed a Varkela leechman to cure the ague, or a toothache, they went to his father, Freneer, the shaman, or to his brother Vaylance; but if it were a horse that was ailing, they would take the extra effort to hunt up Spareen.

He was not always easy to find. He stayed at Freneer's yurt when he was on speaking terms with his father; and when he was not, which was often, he stayed with a Circassian woman in the mountains, a Nogai Tartar woman on the steppe, or sometimes by himself, with only his little tent, just he and the golden-eyes mare, grazing, while he slept his deathlike sleep in the daylight hours.

Like all Children of the Night, he spoke the language of horses, but Spareen had taken the time to learn to speak to other animals as well and could summon the otter, Samuru, his

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soul-beast, from its lair along the Volga into the opening of his shirt, where it would drape itself like a fur collar.

His singing voice rang deep and clean, like the tolling of the larger church bell in the Cossack village. One could listen for hours as he sang the chant for his shaman father or some ribald Russian drinking song in a tavern.

Had anyone called him a Vampire, he would have shrugged his broad shoulders and said, "But Vampires are dead people, and I am not dead." He was pure Varkela of the old type, having thin, hollow blood-teeth where men of humankind have incisors, the so-called canine teeth, which in the Varkela were more fine and catlike. By the practice of medicine on man and beast, he earned the special sustenance these teeth demanded. He was careful to keep his teeth retracted around the Russians he dealt with. People who came out at night and drank human blood were viewed with suspicion by the Slavs, but the Tartars and Kalmuck nomads of the steppe welcomed these practitioners of leechcraft and came monthly to pay the blood-price for services rendered.

Payment had been skimpy for Spareen this month, and he knew that he must earn more before the dark of the moon, the "Blood Moon" as his people called it, that time when hunger became madness. Fortunately he had a call to make tonight: Yusef Bey had an ailing stallion and Spareen, if he effected a cure, would be well paid.

Dragging his saddle from the tent, he whistled sharply and the golden-eyes mare came and stood patiently as he tightened the girth around her sleek black belly and eased the bit between her teeth. Next came the saddle bags containing his pharmacopoeia of herbs, his small lancet of German steel, and two needles.

"Well, is it drinking or working tonight?" asked the mare in the horse language that only the Varkela understand.

"Working tonight," said Spareen, patting his fat saddle bags.

"And drinking on the morrow?" asked the mare.

"Perhaps," said Spareen, and as an afterthought, he reached into the tent again and slung his goatskin wine flask over his saddle bow.

"You drink too much, Spareen," said the mare.

"You think so?" asked Spareen. "I had not noticed."

"You should marry, Spareen," said the mare.

"Oho! So that's what this conversation is about," said Spareen, and prepared himself for a lecture.

"You drink too much lately because you are unsatisfied with life. You should get you a wife and some children," said the mare.

"You know that I've been trying," said Spareen, "but the lady in question must also agree, and I have not heard

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from her these four days."

"If she keeps you waiting, propose to another," said the mare.

Finding a wife was not such an easy task for Spareen as the golden-eyes mare seemed to think, for to do this, he would have a find a woman of his own race, and Varkela women had always been rare, due to a sickness that claimed many of them before puberty. Because of this, Varkela marriages were polyandrous unions lasting only a few years until children were produced. Then the father departed with his offspring to instruct them in the healing arts.

As Freneer, his father, had told him, "Life is lonely without children to teach, and who will keep our knowledge alive if we do not produce children? For we are an old race and are dying out."

And so Spareen yearned after a "wolf-minded" girl, one of his own kind, like Varkura. Now there was a real woman! Not like outblood women who became mute automatons when he witched them with his dark Varkela eyes. Varkura was defiantly an equal, a wolf-minded girl whose devil-dark eyes resisted the summoning power of his own.

At 32, she had already had several husbands, and she professed to being tired of one of the two she had now — she didn't say which — and that had raised his hopes. It was not her beauty that quickened his blod — although she had coils of long black hair, a straight Circassian nose and eyes as deep and still as the Volga on a summer's night. It was her scent that stirred the roots of his belly fur, calling to mind the Varkela saying, "A wolf-minded girl is friendly to the nose." It reminded him of wild ginger that creeps close to the floor of forested Caucasian revines. Compared with her, all outblood women smelled flat and slightly rancid.

And so with pleasant thoughts of her in mind, Spareen vaulted into the saddle and set off on his night's work. The golden-eyes mare chose not to disturb his reverie and cantered evenly across the gently rolling steppe, until they reached the Backwater Slough, a small tributary of the Terek where Yusef Bey, the Tartar prince, bred his fine horses.

The stars sprinkled a fine dust across the night sky as Spareen and his dainty mount entered the Tartar village. They passed the tall wooden tower of the minaret and several low one-story dwellings before turning in at the gate of Yusef Bey. Spareen tethered the mare to the fence and walked around the house to the horse pens, where he saw the light of an oil lamp glowing feebly. In the shadow stood Yusef Bey, the stocky, bearded Tartar chieftain, his brown skin creased like the shell of a walnut; and next to him stood a young man, richly attired in a tunic of black Circassian wool, bound at the waist with a red silk sash. A double row of cartridge

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cases adorned his breast. Spareen judged the man to be a Cossack from one of the Russian outposts along the river.

"Ho, Spareen!" called Yusef Bey. "Now I've got two doctor-men, for one of my sons rode over to the fort and brought back this fellow."

The Cossack raised a disdainful eyebrow toward Spareen's large frame and said, "It's a good thing they've called in someone with a bit of muscle. The way that horse is carrying on, it may require both of us to hold him."

Spareen resented the presence of this sneering Cossack, who seemed to imply that he was good for nothing but muscle, he felt insulted that Yusef Bey had called in an outsider. He was about to decline this case and leave, when an angry neigh reverberated from the stable, followed by loud, hollow pounding of hooves against wood. He then realized that his patient needed him, and he resolved to set aside his anger of the moment.

"He seems to be in quite a rage," said Spareen. "Let me talk to him."

"I'd advise you not to go in there," said the Cossack. "That horse is mad with pain and won't let me touch him."

"Come and watch, Cossack," said Spareen. "You may learn something." He strode confidently into the stable, welcoming the friendly smells of hay and manure, but as he approached the stall where the thick-necked stallion tossed its mane, he became aware of a peculiar odor that caused an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. A thought tugged at his mind, but it was driven out when the large horse screamed in fury and threw its huge body against the rails. The wooden slats creaked and bulged as the horse bounced back off the boards and stood glaring at them through rheumy slits of eyes; foam drooled from the slackened lips as the horse heaved great gusts of air like a bellows. One foreleg bled where a gash had laid it open.

"I don't like his looks," said the Cossack. "I've treated horses in much worse shape than that, but I've never seen one driven to such a state of madness, even in the throes of colic."

"I agree with you," said Spareen. "He even smells wrong."

"I don't smell anything," said the Cossack.

"Outbloods never smell anything," said Spareen. "Can't even smell their own mother until she's been dead three days."

"I'm not paying you two to stand around insulting each other," said Yusef Bey. He drew himself up to his not very imposing full height, his stomach bulging through his flowing tunic.

"I don't know," mused the Cossack. "We could get ropes and throw him. That way we could do something about that leg."

Spareen spoke to the horse in the old language and received a snort for an answer. "I'd advise against it," he said. "He asks us to stay away from him. And there is something about that

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strange smell. It reminds me of something."

Spareen tried to remember where he had smelled such an odor of fear and frenzy before. Something tickled the back of his mind just out of reach.

"How long has he been this way?" he asked Yusef Bey.

"Since he shied and fell under me two days ago," answered the Tartar.

"Anything out of the ordinary before that?"

"Well, now that you mention it, he savaged a mare a few days ago, and he usually takes them without any fuss. He's been rather irritable all week. Wait — there is one thing. My son, Ali, was riding him about two weeks ago, when a bobac came running out of its hole and fastened on his leg. Ali had to dismount and beat it off with a stick. It was very strange. A bobac is such a small thing to be attacking a horse." said Yusef Bey.

Spareen puzzled over the reasons why a small earth-dwelling rodent might bite a horse. And then he remembered.

"When I was quite young, my father tried to treat a horse that had been bitten by a rabid wolf. We had to tie him down with stout ropes before we could kill him, and even then, he chewed through the wooden post that we had tied him to. The teeth marks were full of blood and foam. Your stallion smells the same as that horse did."

"Will you have to kill my stallion, then?" asked Yusef Bey.

"I am afraid so," said Spareen. "otherwise, he may bite someone and pass the sickness on to them."

"You really think this horse has the mad dog's disease?" asked the Cossack doctor. "I myself have never seen it in a horse. And I'm skeptical about sense of smell as a basis for diagnosis. I'm inclined to think he has eaten some hemp and that accounts for his strange behavior."

"Perhaps you're right," said Yusef Bey. "I would hate to lose such a valuable horse over a mouthful of hemp. How sure are you, Spareen?"

"Surer than sure," said Spareen. "The nose remembers what the mind forgets."

The stallion, which had been standing quietly for the last few minutes, made a plaintive nicker and shook his mane.

"You see," said Spareen, "he wishes us to kill him before the madness overtakes him again. He wishes not to hurt those who love him."

Spareen said something to the horse. It raised its head and looked him in the eyes, then lowered its muzzle to the floor dejectedly.

"I can't let you kill him until I am sure," said Yusef Bey. "If it is hemp, it should be out of his system by tomorrow. And if not, I can put him out of his misery myself."

"No", said Spareen, "your horse is a noble fellow. I only wish I had met him under happier circumstances. I

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will come tomorrow and do the deed as it should be done. I will say the horse prayer over him, that he may find his way to the pastures of the spirit world." He hastened to add, "There is no charge for it."

"I'll come back tomorrow myself," the Cossack said, "You'll see that I'm right. I was educated in St. Petersburg, and I know a bit more than your witch-man from the steppes."

"I only wish you were right," said Spareen. The death of a horse always saddened him. Among the Varkela, horses were treated as kin and were addressed as "sister," "brother," or "spouse."

As there was nothing more to be done for the stallion that night, Spareen took his leave of Yusef Bey and rode back to his camp. On the way, he took several swigs from his wine flask and tried to ignore the gnawing hunger that pained his blood-teeth. Not to be paid was a serious problem this late in the month. He thought of Culeer, who had died several years back, when the Nogai Tartars refused to pay him the blood-price. Such a fate did not appeal to him.

There are other alternatives, thought Spareen, who did not always earn his blood by honest leechcraft but sometimes made the trade for love among the outblood women. This was frowned on by his father, who said, "Our own women will reject you if you continue in that way." Spareen seriously considered going to the fort village, which was not far away, and luring one of those handsome Cossack women out into the night. But then he thought of Varkura and decided against it for the time being.

He rode to the top of a small rise and was just about to turn toward his camp when he saw the light of a campfire in the opposite direction. He decided he had better check out his new neighbors and gave the golden-eyes mare a nudge with his boot. She descended the grassy slope at a trot, and soon Spareen could see, rising from the dark steppe, the white mushroomlike forms of yurts, the homes of nomad people. It was a settlement of Kalmucks.

What luck! he thought. Surely someone here will require my services. And he set out to find the head man.

Dismounting before the most prominent yurt, with a banner in front of its doorway, Spareen dropped the reins and left the mare to graze.

"Does anyone here require healing?" he called out the traditional question of his people.

A short swarthy Kalmuck came out through the door flap and paused to look at Spareen, apparently sizing him up before speaking.

"So, a Varkela," said the man. "We already have an agreement with one of your kind, a fellow from across the river."

That would be Culance, thought Spareen, and my luck isn't changing as I'd hoped.

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To the Kalmuck he said, "Is there no small healing I could do here? For I have not earned enough this month and I am fainting." He was not fainting yet, but it might come to that.

The Kalmuck looked at him doubtfully and said, "Very well, you may inquire of everyone here, but I'm afraid you'll find us quite healthy, — and, mind you, leave our women alone."

Spareen went to the next yurt — there were only six in all — and asked but found every family member free of sickness. At the next, one child had a wart on his hand, but they refused to let Spareen treat it, saying it would go away of its own accord. and so it went, until Spareen reached the last dwelling. There was a very pregnant mare tethered outside this last yurt.

Well, thought Spareen, sometimes a man must make his own luck. And he spoke to this mare, saying, "Lie down, little sister and don't get up until I tell you."

The mare knelt and rolled her ungainly form to one side.

Spareen rattled the blanket at the door frame and said, "It appears that you have a sick mare here. Perhaps I can be of service."

An old woman came out and looked at the mare, lying on the ground, and said, "By the Buddha's beard, she was fine just an hour ago. Perhaps she is dropping her foal now."

"I think not," said Spareen, "for there are no contractions and she's not breathing hard. I think it's a touch of of the ague and that's especially dangerous when they are this close to foaling."

"Whatever shall I do? She's our best milk mare," said the woman.

"I think I can help her," said Spareen, "but you must be willing to pay my price."

"Yes, I know, you Varkela must have your price. My son will pay you. He's young and healthy. Do what you can for my mare."

So Spareen set about making his bogus cure. He spent a long time looking for a certain herb and then made a steaming infusion of this plant over the cookfire. After it had cooled, he placed a bowl of it near the head of the "sick" mare and helped her drink some of the harmless broth. Rather than profane the "chant of healing," he sang a folk song over the mare as he walked around her three times. He sang in Varkela, which the woman did not understand, about a young ruffian who wasted all his energy on drinking and outblood women and never got himself children. And then, because he felt a bit guilty, he got his hasp out of his saddle bags and filed his patient's hooves down, for they had been long neglected and had grown out to the point that it was difficult for her to go at any pace faster than a walk. In about an hour's time, the cure was successful and the mare scrambled to her feet when he gave her the command.

"Simply amazing!" said the woman. "One would never guess that

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an hour ago she was at the gates of death." She went off to fetch her son and shortly returned with a solid man of 35, smoking tobacco in a little silver pipe. Spareen led the man around to the back of the yurt and bled him from the arm for the allotted time. It wasn't much. His teeth cried for more, but he withdrew his mouth and found that they didn't hurt quite so much as before.

He went to find the golden-eyes mare. She had wandered off to graze, dragging her bridle reins along the ground. He found her among the nomad cattle, eating her fill of the scrubby grasses.

He gathered up the reins and prepared to mount her, but before he could get his foot into the stirrup, she reached around and nipped him on the rump.

"Ow, now what's that all about?" he asked.

"Spareen, for shame!" said the golden-eyes mare.

"Well, she did need to have her feet trimmed," said Spareen, and he mounted and started for home. When he got back to his small camp, he noted by the stars that it was a little after midnight. He unsaddled the mare and rubbed and scratched her where the saddle had flattened the hair. Then he got his currying tools from the tent and began to ruffle the hair against the grain and then comb it out straight.

In the distance he observed a rider approaching that looked like Varkura. When he saw that indeed it was she, he went walking out to greet her. He hoped that she had decided in his favor and would invite him to live with her, bear him children, to share his lonely life and to instruct in the old tradition.

As she approached, he saw no smile of welcome on her face but, rather, a brooding serious look, as though she faced an unpleasant duty. He caught her horse by the bridle and stood waiting for her to speak. In answer to his unspoken question, she took from her embroidered waistband the little dagger he had given her in pledge and threw it down.

"Take back your own, Spareen," she said, her white blood-teeth winking in the corners of her mouth. Spareen bent to retrieve the dagger where it had stuck in the turf. His hand closed over the ivory hilt with its silver filigree.

"I take it that you refuse me then," he said. "But would you at least tell me the reason?"

"I have heard that you have polluted yourself overmuch with outblood women. Perhaps you even have 'the house disease,' she said. The "house disease" was what the yurt-dwelling peoples of the steppe called syphilis.

"I do not deny that I have been with outblood women. Who hasn't? I'll wager none of your husbands came to you a virgin. But I am not unclean. Do not reject me on that account." he said.

But she ignored his words, reined

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her gray stallion and rode off into the night, her back straight as a knife blade, her long black hair flapping in the wind. Spareen stared down at his little dagger, a gift from the outlaw, Yurgi Khan, whose leg he'd sewn up after a skirmish with the Cossacks.

"If my luck continues like this," he said, "I ought to go down to the Turkish border, geld myself and enter a harem." He walked back to his tent, took up his curry comb and began to groom the golden-eyes mare again. She munched grass contentedly and did not offer any advice, for which he was grateful.

He realized that it was quite late. Around this time of night he was in the habit of taking his flintlock out and bagging a few large Russian hares for the supper pot. But although his belly was empty, he felt very little of that sort of hunger. His hollow veins craved other nourishment, and he envied humankind who never have that dark hunger, whose plump flesh was always full of the juice of life.

The birds awoke long before dawn and began their morning chorus. Spareen, who often sang with them, did not have the heart today and crawled into his tent early to start his daytime sleep. In their state of daylight estivation, the Varkela had sometimes been mistaken for the undead, the Nosferat, and for this reason, Spareen made his camp far from the camps of men, and the golden-eyes mare stood sentinel while he slept. In the dark interior of the tent, Spareen slowed his heart and his breathing and slept the sleep of his people.

When he awoke again, the sun had just gone down and a mist of red lay over the western horizon. He remembered his words to Yusef Bey and prepared to return there this night to carry out the grim task of killing the stallion as painlessly as possible. The thought sickened him. He thought of how the noble beast had spoken to him, asking to be put to death rather than bring harm to his master. The otter, Samuru, came and begged to be taken along. Spareen scratched his fur and placed him in the saddle bags. Next, he gathered up his equipment, saddled the golden-eyes mare and rode off in the direction of the Terek. He arrived at the Tartar village as the last light was dying on the horizon. Yusef Bey was waiting for him at the stable, oil lamp in hand and the Cossack veterinarian stood a little to one side. The light played upon the double row of cartridge cases across his breast.

A piercing neigh came from the stable, followed by much kicking and banging of hooves.

"It appears, Spareen, that you were right all along," said Yusef Bey.

The Cossack said nothing, but Spareen thought there was less of the haughty look than he had seen before.

The same loathsome smell permeated the stable. Spareen saw where the stallion had bitten through one of the wooden posts that held the hay

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rack. The big horse stood in the far corner, his flanks heaving, his muzzle resting on the ground. Suddenly he raised his head and shook it violently as if trying to dislodge some unseen demon that clung there. He reared and lunged into the wall, smashing his shoulder into the boards, then stood there shaking all over, his frightened eyes rolling so that the whites showed like boiled eggs.

Spareen spoke to the horse in the old language, saying, "I am here, little brother."

The stallion slowly raised its head and looked at Spareen. The wildness went out of his eyes and was replaced by such a look of sorrow, that Spareen could not bear to let the poor animal suffer any more.

"That's the first calm he's shown all day," said Yusef Bey.

"It's only the calm between storms," said Spareen. "We must hurry before the madness strikes again. I will need a strong rope and you must help me. Quickly now!"

A stout rope was fetched by Yusef Bey, and Spareen made a halter out of one length. He entered the stall and knotted it over the stallion's fine head. With the remaining rope, Spareen hobbled the front legs on the back, so that the horse could walk quietly but could not thrash about. Then with Yusef Bey holding the front rope and the Cossack holding the rear, Spareen slowly led the stallion out of the stall. In the yard behind the stable was a small incline. Spareen positioned the horse so that his rear legs were at the top and his forelegs at the bottom of this hill.

"Lie down, little brother," he commanded. "It will all be over soon."

The horse obeyed, but as soon as he lay on his side on the ground, the madness seized him and he began tossing about, struggling against the ropes. With a deft movement, Spareen looped the rope in such a way as to bring the front and rear legs together and tied them fast. Then he walked around to the head, knelt down and put his knee on the stallion's great thick neck. He could feel the muscles flex and pull under him. With his little scalpel of German steel, he found the pulsing artery in the throat and made a quick incision. Blood flowed out of the wound in a thick river, downhill into the depression where it pooled. Spareen could sense the life oozing from the great body. Slowly, the flexing subsided and he felt the neck go limp under his knee.

Spareen felt a song rise in his throat. He loosed his mighty voice and sang the horse prayer, as his people had sung it through the ages to ease the passage of their brothers to the spirit world.

When the horse had breathed its last, Spareen stood up and began to clean his scalpel on a bit of cloth he carried for that purpose. He tossed the rag down by the carcass and said to Yusef Bey:

"You must dispose of the body by

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burial and burn the ground where the blood has spilled. Be careful that no blood or saliva touch you."

"Why such superstitious ritual?" asked the Cossack doctor, whose 19th century education had taught him little of contagion.

"I do not know," said Spareen. "We have always treated certain diseases this way. It is the old knowledge."

They walked back to the barn. Spareen overheard the Cossack remark, "One might almost believe that old tale about those who speak the horses' language." The Cossack doctor mounted his horse and bade them good evening. Spareen gathered up his saddle bags and was preparing to leave also, when Yusef Bey asked him to come in for a moment and have some refreshment.

"I cannot offer you the customary fee, as you have not healed," said Yusef Bey, "but your people do eat as other men, don't they? I have fresh cream butter, bread and cheese."

Spareen, who had not filled his stomach since the night before, accepted the hospitality and went into the house. At a small table lighted by a single oil lamp, he was offered little bread pockets of cheese and sweet cream butter by a buxom young woman.

"My daughter, Halima," said Yusef Bey, as the girl served them.

"Your daughter, the slave!" snapped the girl and spun on her heel and walked out of the room.

Spareen's gaze followed the retreating roundness of Halima, and he was reminded of the small Persian mellons that overflow with sweetness in the summer market stalls.

"She's angry," said Yusef Bey, "that we've promised her in marriage to a rich man. I'll tell you a secret. She saw you last night and said to me, 'There is none handsomer than Spareen of the Varkela.' She favors you, Spareen, but I must ask you not to witch her."

Spareen, who had been thinking of doing just that, smiled sheepishly and stared at the tabletop. "All right," he said, "you have my promise." But a slight hint of a smile remained on his lips.

Yusef Bey was not satisfied. "What do you swear by?" he asked with some suspicion.

"By my father's blood," sighed Spareen, who regretted being bound by an oath, "by the great mother tree that upholds the world, and by the gray-ghost stag sacred to my people Varkela."

Thus reassured, Yusef Bey resumed his supper, tearing at the bread with his old yellow teeth. Halima brought them soured milk to drink, and Spareen, true to his word, did not seek to engage her glance but thanked her politely with lowered eyes. When the meal was finished, he said farewell to Yusef Bey and went out into the night. The wind was fragrant with sweet grass scent, and the black sky was

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swept clear of clouds so that only the clean white stars remained.

Spareen was tightening the saddle girth against the belly of the golden-eyes mare, when he heard the rustle of woman's clothing behind him.

"You go back, then?" said Halima. The sleeve of her dress barely brushed his arm. Her perfume, mixed with the scent of warm flesh, caused his mouth to water involuntarily. The golden-eyes mare closed her nostrils to slits and stamped a hind foot.

"Yes, I'm leaving now," said Spareen, "and you'd better go back in the house. What would your father say if he knew you approached strange men in the dark?"

"I'd tell him you lured me out here and broke your promise," she said. "So you'd better be kind to me, hear me out."

"Apparently, I've no choice," said Spareen. Her bare throat, milky and smooth in the dim light, tempted him awfully, and he felt his thin blood-teeth begin to protrude beyond their normal, slightly retracted position.

"Speak your say then," he said.

"I've heard how Varkura misused you, Spareen. I wanted to tell you I sympathize," she said.

"So, everyone knows about my love life," sighed Spareen.

"Word gets around on the steppe," she said.

"Well, are you going to give me advice?" he asked. "Everyone seems to be giving me advice lately."

"No," she answered and looked shyly down at her feet. She seemed to be deliberating over what she wanted to say. Finally, she blurted out, "I want to offer myself in her stead."

Spareen laughed gently and patted her shoulder. "Little one," he said, "we only marry among our own kind." He felt protective toward her, for she was not more than 18 years old. Her boldness reminded him of his first brash offer to a woman twice his age and how she'd laughed at him.

Halima stared at her feet a few moments to gather her thoughts and then said, "You've taken women without marriage before. Take me with you. You are lonely and I've no desire to marry the fat old man my father has chosen for me."

"And when I leave you, what will become of you? Have you thought of that? Your parents would most likely sell you into slavery among the Turks. I would not want that on my conscience." He was about to send her away, when suddenly the stars spun dizzily overhead and the grass fell up and hit him in the face.

"What's the matter?" she asked, bending over him where he had fallen.

He raised his head feebly, and when that proved to be too great an effort, he rolled over on his back and looked up at her where she knelt over him.

"It's the blood need. I fainted."

"Father didn't pay you?" she asked. She lowered herself to his level, placing

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her neck close to his face. "Here, take from me."

"I have not healed. Therefore, I've not earned payment." he said. "And, besides, we do not take from the neck except in the act of love."

She was lying on the grass, looking down at him. When he made this last statement, her face brightened with a smile, and with a quick movement she placed her leg over his, as if she would slide over on top of him.

"No, you mustn't," he said, sitting up suddenly, almost bumping heads with her. "I've promised your father."

"You only promised not to witch me," she said. "I have come of my own free will."

Spareen pondered this a moment. Technically, she was right. But sadly he realized he was not equipped to take advantage of the situation, having not enough blood to sustain an erection. And the blood need gnawed at him, driving all other needs away, in its craving for thick red warmth.

"Oh, your teeth," she said, "they're getting longer."

She touched one of the fine, needle-like points where it protruded over his lower lip.

"Ow, now it's cut me," she said, holding her finger up to his mouth.

He healed the tiny wound with a lick of his thin dog-like tongue. A sly smile played over his features and he observed her through half-closed eyes. She shivered when his lips brushed her throat, at first timidly seeking, then eagerly nuzzling the right spot, licking, and then the love-bite. Life flowed into him in waves. One wave refreshed the dry riverbed of his sexual desire and it swelled in a mighty flood. He withdrew his teeth and sealed the pinprick wounds with his tongue.

She played her hand across the front of his trousers. Her finger came to rest on a small damp spot.

"You're wet," she said, stroking the firmness under the drawstring of his pants.

Spareen judiciously chose his best line.

"He weeps," he said. "He wishes you to comfort him." Then he thought of Yusef Bey and hastened to add, "Of your own free will, of course."

"Of my own free will," she smiled down at him and then, shifting her weight strategically, she prepared to comfort him.

He was rubbing comfrey leaves into the wound on her neck and abraiding it gently with his fire-cleansed scalpel.

"You can say that you scratched yourself on a bramble," he said. "On your wedding night, put some blood on a sponge under the sheet so that your husband does not reject you."

"What if I should have a child?" she asked.

"That seldom happens with out-blood women," said Spareen. "Still, if it should, send word to me and I'll come for you."

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"But I'll be married by then."

"I'll come for you, if the child is mine, but I've never been that lucky in the past."

He helped her up from the grass where they had beat it down. There was a small spot on his trousers where she had shed her maiden blood. He noted that she looked at him hopefully but did not cling to him, and he felt guilty that he could not love her. Still, he knew the situation demanded some show of tenderness, and he was grateful for the strength that now flowed through him.

Reaching into one of his plump saddle pouches, he found Samuru, the otter, curled and sleeping. He pulled the otter out of its nest and offered it to Halima.

"You won't need to feed him," said Spareen. "He's a night hunter. He takes care of himself."

She cradled the smooth-haired otter in her arms.

"I'll think of him as your child," she said softly.

Spareen watched as she walked stealthily back to the house and crept in the back way. The golden-eyes mare laid her ears flat and reached around to bite him, but he jumped just out of her reach, then bounded into the saddle before she could collect herself for another try.

"Jealous, my love?" asked Spareen.

"You'll never make any children that way," said the mare.

He nudged her sides and she set off at a lope. The rolling steppe spread out before them like a furry quilt in the starlight. The stars stretched in a milky haze across the silent summer sky. A large Russian hare darted out of a hillock and crossed his path, but Spareen did not feel like shooting tonight. A sadness was passing through him now that all his needs were met, and the scent of wild ginger seemed to hover just beyond his reach. When they came to the crest of the hill and were looking down on his little tent, Spareen nudged the mare the other way, toward the road to the Cossack village, for he'd just seen a vision of himself sitting in the tavern, his teeth fully retracted, singing the lonely night away, and his heart moved toward that vision.

"So, it's drinking again," said the golden-eyes mare.

"And singing," said Spareen

"And being sick on the morrow?"

"Perhaps."

"You should marry, Spareen," said the golden eyes mare.

"You've said that before," said Spareen.

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This story begins in the packed, dimly lit tavern of the space terminal of God's Armpit and proceeds to some furious action aboard the starship Astraeus. In short, a crackling sf adventure story, and most welcome it is. Bill Walling's new novel, THE WORLD I LEFT BEHIND ME *was recently published by St. Martin's Press.*

Triggerman

BY

WILLIAM WALLING

. . . nor will the taking and holding of hostages constitute a basis for acceding to such demands.

17.5.0 *Without exception, all hostages shall be considered pre-deceased, thus removing concern for their "safety" from potential plea-bargaining overtures on the part of terrorists, hijackers, or other individuals directly responsible for, implicated in the commission of, or otherwise engaged in aiding or abetting perpetration of this heinous crime.*

Extract from LEX GALACTICUM, Quarto V, Section III, Paragraph 17.4, *et seq.*

"What do you want from life, Man?"

Without bothering to raise his head, Lukens mumbled, "Not ... a whole helluva lot...." Apathy and overindulgence conspired to make the flaccid vowel sounds and wheezing aspirates of his Lingua Stella barely intelligible.

Assuming that some comrade-in-arms had paused to josh him, the man stirred — a burly individual whose stubbled cheek was augured by a livid scar. He knuckled watery blue eyes, squinting upward.

Jam-packed with raucous males and bumptious females of a half-dozen humanoid species — transients, con men, grifters, prostitutes and gamblers — the dimly lit tavern lay in a brawling stewpot surrounding the space terminal of God's Armpit. When full realization of who confronted him seeped in, Luken's jaw fell open. The gross, barrel-shaped form of a Kree warrior loomed across the battered table. Wonder of wonders, behind the first alien hulked a second! Sobered by the twin apparitions, the man dipped into a halting acquaintance with the lisping

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Kree tongue, *"One offers ... a humble greeting."*

The foremost warrior stumped a pace nearer. "We shall use the vernacular, Man. May we seat ourselves?"

"Uh, surely, surely." The human's inviting gesture was casual, but his lips had adopted a grim set. Rickety furniture complained at the unaccustomed overload. Lukens flinched under the scrutiny of protruding eyes deeply socketed below brow ridges that flared beneath hairless bulging craniums.

In the Llanasan War's aftermath, all exoskeletal mammals were considered bad news. The Kree in particular enjoyed a reputation for brutish duplicity unmatched in this remote sector of the spiral arm. Lukens had once witnessed a scuffle between a recruit, who fancied himself adept in the martial arts, and an adult Kree warrior. Delivering an ill-conceived karate chop, the green trooper had clutched his broken arm, managing one short-bitten curse before the Kree's armored forearm pulped his skull. Tackling a Kree barehanded was worse than foolhardy — a grisly form of suicide.

"What do you want from life, Man?"

Now relatively alert, Lukens pondered the restated question. "Oh, three squares'n a flop're about the limit of my —"

"Refrain from colloquialisms! We have no inclination to exchange banter. You command a small mercenary force, do you not?"

Testy and stand-offish like most professional officers, the man nevertheless decided a fifth-rate grog shop in God's Armpit was not the proper forum for flippancy. "Major Lukens, at your service," he said, looking wryly from one Kree to the other.

"Are you presently employed, Man?"

Lifting calloused hands, the major allowed them to drop limply. "Between, uh, engagements at the moment."

"Excellent! In that case we wish to contract for your services. For you, it promises to be an extremely lucrative association."

Lukens resumed his slouch. Although the encounter had taken an intriguing turn, business acumen by no means overrode his wariness. "Fair enough," he said in a guarded tone. "Say on, mate."

The spokesman hunched forward, making the table groan. His discourse sounded rehearsed. Eyes veiled, Lukens paid unswerving attention, nodding sagaciously from time to time.

"Not exactly my usual line of work," he remarked at length. "That sort of exercise'll come damned high. *Very* damned high."

"The reward will be commensurate with the deed," assured the Kree, "and with the risk."

"Uh-huh. S'pose we can hash out the details. Forge ahead."

The stolid alien continued to enumerate the terms and conditions of pro-

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spective employment until, suddenly, the man grunted loudly. "Uh-uh, not this bo! Look up LEX GALACTICUM, Section —"

"Hear me!" The Kree rapped the table smartly, all but causing it to collapse. "Our contract will assure your financial independence for life. You need never work again, Man."

The man's snort was contemptuous. "True enough! I'd be *dead.*"

"By no means. Can you conceive an extenuating circumstance which might prohibit the Imperial authorities from invoking the so-worrisome proviso of LEX GALACTICUM?"

"I cannot, mate. In all truth, I cannot."

The spokesman mentioned a sum of money.

Lukens gagged. He rocked his head in disbelief, then put back the dregs in his glass with a swift motion. "You'll think me foolish to brush off such a handsome offer without a hearing, but ... no. No way, my gentle Kree friends. I really must decline."

The Kree mentioned a sum half again as large as the first.

Perspiring now, the man said, "You're joking!"

"Our kind possess six perceptive senses, Man. But not what is known as the 'sense of humor.'"

"Y-you spoke ... of an extenuating circumstance?"

Unself-consciously, the spokesman dropped a name.

"*He* will be aboard?"

"Most assuredly. As well as his family, his whole entourage. In light of contemporary Imperial politics, he is the most important figure in the visited galaxy — and therefore a firm guarantee that in this singular instance LEX GALACTICUM will fail to be invoked."

Lukens continued to sweat. "Now I'm, uh, on your wavelength," he said hollowly. "Tell me, what'll the Kree expect from this?"

"Our demands will be purely political. You and your confederates are welcome to retain any additional monies you may extort."

"I ... see. And, after the caper? What're my lads and I to do afterward, get up and *walk* away?"

"A means of flight, and suitable haven, will be provided. The fee will be deposited to your account before the ... adventure begins, payable in tungsten, thorium, stellars — any civilized currency or precious metal you care to specify."

Lukens blinked bloodshot eyes. He licked his lips. "Still sounds pretty flaky," he said. "I'll have to sleep on —"

"Your decision must be immediate, Man. You have learned far too much about our affairs to lightly decline."

Major Lukens stiffened. "An 'offer I can't refuse,' is it?"

"Analyze your position logically," urged the spokesman: "You go armed, but could you draw out your laser weapon and burn *both* of us before ... the end?"

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"'Tis a fine, high-velocity argument," conceded Major Lukens.

"Excellent! You shall accompany us to our vessel on-orbit. You may return, later, and recruit selected assistants. Come!"

Stone-faced, the mercenary pushed back his chair. He shuffled hesitantly between the blocklike Kree, shooting quick glances of appeal toward the crowded bar. Not one of his carousing troopers paid the slightest heed to the exit.

Lukens stifled the curse rising in this throat. God's Armpit, he reflected bitterly, had been aptly named!

The longer Sather waited, the more anxious he became. After months of anticipation, innumerable briefing sessions and high-level counselings, he was actually aboard ship, preparing for his pristine mission "Out There." He was very apprehensive about it — scared, to be truthful. Never in his wildest imaginings had he envisioned a first assignment of such magnitude.

For the twentieth time in an hour he fingered the microelectronic switches surgically implanted in the soft tissue under either jawbone — flat lumps, bulging not at all — designed so that boorish armorer had told him to be capable of activation in an emergency by simply rolling his head from side to side. In fact the armorer had forced him to practice it. Even bound and gagged, hanging upside down, Sather would be able to trigger the lethal switches. A sequence of coded pressures on the leftmost would trigger the one on the right; a shorter sequence applied to the right switch would trigger....

Triggerman! That's what the blasted armorer had called him. Pleading with Secretary Drake, Sather had used every iota of persuasive guile he possessed in arguing the futility of turning *him*, a fledgling career diplomat, into some outré form of human bomb. The Secretary for Alien Affairs had remained unmoved, smiling paternally. It seemed that LEX GALACTICUM demanded autodestruct capabilities for every Imperial starship destined to range beyond the periphery of human civilization — an inheritance from the Llanasan War, Sather presumed. There were no exceptions. The ship's master was usually entrusted with the honor, for the awesome responsibility was indeed an honor. One couldn't argue with Secretary Drake, and certainly not with LEX GALACTICUM.

But for a civilian starship bound on a voyage so crucial to Mankind's immediate destiny, the notion of a "suicide switch" struck Sather as absurd. No, as obscene!

Immured deep within the vessel's welded alloy bulkheads lurked a ridiculously small thermonuclear device. Were Sather to find it necessary — try as he would, he couldn't conceive such an eventuality — to depress the switches in sequences known only to himself, and to that arrogant armorer now

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peacefully asleep somewhere down in rural Pennsylvania, the weapon would instantly transform *Astraeus* into a fleeting cloud of radioactive gases.

The diplomat jerked nervous fingers away from his throat. He waited, glancing now and again at the ship's subjective timing system readout winking on the bulkhead of the astrogator's lounge.

The anticipated call came at 04:36, Terran Zone 9 Time, when a communications officer swam topsy-turvy into the lounge and beckoned. "Signal for you, sir. You can take it in the security booth."

Sather nodded his thanks, pulling himself hand-over-hand along the free-fall safety lines into the conning deck. From their respective stations, the master and bridge officers watched his entrance with curious eyes. The soundproofed cubicle abaft the comm console was tiny. He had difficulty gaining leverage to shut the door, self-conscious because of his ineptness under zero gee.

"There you are," announced the vidicom. "I'm scrambling, Sather. We can speak freely." Regarding him stoically was Terran Secretary for Alien Affairs, the Honorable Alan R. Drake, with the sunburst medallion of *Pax Terrestriana* gleaming on the breast of his tunic.

"Everything's prepared, Mr. Secretary. His Radiance and the members of his delegation should have a pleasant transit."

"But not you, I daresay." The elder statesman's unsmiling visage stared back at Sather. Drake looked weary, especially around the eyes, as if he hadn't slept well for weeks. Which was probably the case. "I realize you've already been briefed to distraction. I know you'll make every effort to rein your ... that is, to conduct yourself with decorum. Be again forewarned, however: insult and innuendo are His Radiance's stock in trade."

"If I'd had less confidence in myself, sir, I wouldn't have volunteered. May I ask how the final conference went?"

"Oh, these preliminary fencings and skirmishings mean little." The other's voice was ridged with frustration. "Mutual resentments and bitternesses over the Llanasan War — they're now beginning to call it the War of Misunderstanding, by the way — will linger for decades. Next year, when we're escorted to Llanasa for the Phase II talks, I anticipate a much more fruitful.... God, Sather! Better we'd stayed home and never met any exoskeletal demons!"

"Yes, sir."

Drake smacked his lips tiredly. "Well, best I sign off and let you get cracking. You've wangled a damned thankless assignment for your first duty Out There. You'll be away from the Fond and Familiar, among belligerent aliens, for a long time. I realize how foolish the, er, destruct rigamarole seems. Think of it as a formality, a ne-

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cessary evil. In fact, I order you to forget about it."

– "Of course, sir. Will you drop in on Marilyn now and then?"

"Delighted to, Sather. After all, Jane and I promised to look after her, didn't we? Oh, one thing more. I'll expect an interim report via ultraband once you reach Way Station."

"Right, sir. We're scheduled for a refueling layover."

"Good, good. All of us have absolute faith in you, you know."

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I won't let you down."

"The least of my worries. The very least, my boy. Bon voyage!"

Sather slumped in the booth after switching off. Closing his eyes, he sought to compose himself, not wanting his agitation to infect other members of the ship's company. From master to lowliest scullery cook, *Astraeus* was crewed by hand-picked volunteers, all of whom had heard tales — some exaggerated, some not — concerning the bellicose aliens they would be escorting to their distant homeworld. The primary requisite for candidates had been that no selectee had lost a near relative during the internecine, hotly contested interstellar war just concluded. The War of Misunderstanding was, Sather reflected, an apt cognomen.

Spoiled by a lack of challenge during its centuries of unthwarted expansion, the Terrestrial Imperium had unwittingly encroached upon a volume of space governed by the Llanasan Hegemony. Confronting each other in the dark alley of interstellar vacuum, the respective cultures had growled once, then scrabbled for one another's throats like predatory jungle creatures.

Anticipating quick victories, Imperial Space Forces had instead met with stunning reversals. The enigmatic Llanasans evidenced high technological sophistication, their electromagnetic shielding techniques subtly countering the superior firepower of the Imperium's Sunday punch, rendering impotent the ferrite-seeker warheads of missiles, denigrating the effectiveness of dekajoule laser batteries.

Terran casualties had mounted alarmingly, though absolutely no differences were resolved since *all* encounters had been military. Captured Llanasan warriors — tens of thousands were taken as the dreary years wore on — had the disconcerting habit of exhibiting a berserk form of madness before dying in agony several hundred hours later. Nor had the finest available medical talents been able to discover chemical, biological, bacteriological or any other reasons for the wholesale alien deaths. The effect on Imperial morale had been devastating; Llanasan captives who became separated from their commands during viciously contested ground battles — planets like Concrellin changed ownership time and again — had been transformed by some unknown catalyst into mindless berserkers who were unbeat-

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able. Killable, yes. But *not* conquerable.

The bloodshed reached insane proportions and would have continued but for the self-sacrifice of a captured intelligence agent who, prior to execution for espionage, had persuaded his interrogators to pause and negotiate.

This tentative foot-in-the-door precipitated a wary ceasefire, culminating in full-scale diplomatic conferences held in neutral space. But diplomacy had broken down repeatedly as His Radiance, the Llanasan Plenipotentiary, changed from cultured diplomat into scowling, tongue-lashing demon. To Terra's diplomatic corps, these Jekyll and Hyde transformations had been a first magnitude enigma. The envoy seemed intelligent and understanding one instant, the next utterly refractory and uncompromising. Llanasan's were so ... *different*, although a suitably dressed alien adult might pass for a gangling human being in poor light.

At last, with negotiations teetering on the brink of permanent rupture, a scholarly xenologist dispatched to the conference site in a last-ditch attempt to save whatever proved salvageable, had earned universal respect for deducing the root of the Llanasan puzzle. It seemed Llanasan sexuality did not culminate in the familiar human ecstatic paroxysm, orgasm. Llanasans were saddled with a truly devastating biological drive — pain.

Deprived of congress with one another for protracted periods, alien males and females alike soon developed a restlessness which grew into acute distress. Unless quenched by coupling — self-imposed cultural taboos prohibited masturbation or homosexuality in any form — waxing agony in the sensitive genitalia terminated in berserk madness and eventual death. Akin to a racial self-destruct mechanism, this unenviable sex drive had been cause for much recent speculation on Sather's part. He saw in it an eerie analog to his secondary role as Triggerman, picturing Llanasans coupling in blind sexual frenzy, desperate to blot the overwhelming pain in the only manner possible within their Spartan constraints. To them, fulfillment was relief, not release; anodyne instead of pleasure.

Sighing, the diplomat opened his eyes, having imagined no such exotic assignment when applying for xenodiplomatic work. He recalled Secretary Drake's parting words at the final briefing session:

"Sather, we *must* learn to appreciate something emotionally as well as intellectually. Our standards and lifestyles, our code of laws and ethics may seem perfectly viable to us. But perhaps *only* to us. The Llanasans, not to mention other ET's we've stumbled across, are not as we are, do not think and react as we do. Humanity'd best learn to live with non-anthropocentric ideals damned fast, else pull in its horns and be content to remain a provincial, backwater species."

Reflecting wryly on the wisdom of

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this, Sather touched the lethal implants in his neck one last time. He pulled himself toward the main airlock with less than total enthusiasm.

Although wearing civvies — uniforms and other military accouterments being passé in the wake of recent carnage — the young lieutenant of Imperial Marines evidenced his spit-and-polish training by managing a brace despite the uncertainties of zero gee. He "stood" on the velcro deck matting, eying his small squad in an endless search for unshined boots or other vestiges of careless grooming. Lining the portside airlock's vestibule, out-of-uniform marines comprised the starship's security force, though what was to be feared baffled Sather every bit as much as his Triggerman role. Thanks to LEX GALACTICUM, security was a habit the Imperial authorities had not outgrown.

Faint, conducted scraping sounds caused by unshipping the umbilical tube reached Sather. The starship's intercom system crackled into life. "Rendezvous and docking concluded. Demate accomplished. All hands stand by for pseudo-gee."

Gradually, accompanied by a passing twinge of dizziness, Sather felt himself grow heavier. In a moment his feet were pressing into the velcro deck matting with comforting assurance he'd known all his earthbound life. With a nervous cough, he willed himself to relax.

"Mr., uh, Sather ..." The young marine lieutenant made a project of clearing his throat. "What if they try'n talk to us?"

"You've been briefed." Realizing how snappish that had sounded, Sather tempered his response. "Answer all direct questions, Lieutenant, but make no overtures. Wasn't that made clear?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Sure was."

"Then, presumably, you've passed along the instruction."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, I didn't mean to seem —"

"Shush-h-h! The Llanasan party's coming inboard."

Servomotors whined. The inner lock cycled open ponderously. Framed in the ellipsoid opening was a regal, dominating presence.

Fashioned of some stiff material resembling burnished metal, His Radiance's pleated jacket accentuated the sweep of armored shoulders. A silver loinstrap covered the soft flesh of his unarmored abdomen, with a frilly, curtainlike arrangement extending downward to midthigh. Long, tapering arms were folded as if in challenge, the smooth external armor sheathed in a faintly blue-tinged epidermis. A dark cape, flowing behind the alien to the "floor" of the lock chamber, helped create an impression of Satanic majesty.

But stereographs had not prepared Sather for the intensity of those baleful amber eyes — enormous cat's eyes, with vertical, dark-slitted pupils star-

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ing fixedly from beneath preposterously flaring brow ridges.

The diplomat remembered himself at last. *"A felicitous welcome, O Radiant One."* He bowed low. *"May thy homecoming be an occasion for great rejoicing."*

The towering alien plenipotentiary returned the bow with a slight tilt of his spine, a barely perceptible tip of his gleaming skull. *"Art thou,"* he said, straightening, *"he known as Sather?"*

"I hight Sather, most Radiant One."

"Quite so. He known as Drake informed us of thy ... zeal."

His Radiance stepped lithely from the airlock. The members of his retinue flowed silently around him, standing like so many statues cast in blued-steel, among them a number of Llanasan females as well as several children.

"Sather, thy striving toward command of the Llanasan tongue doth fall but flatly on the ear. Wilt thou be offended if one requests thee to dispense with it forthwith?"

"I had hoped...." Stung, Sather smarted at the other's ungraciousness. "Since I'm to live among your people," he said in Lingua Stella, "it seemed only proper to —"

"Practice on another occasion," directed the envoy brusquely. "If we are not mistaken, you represent one of the brown-skinned human subspecies called — for some obscure reason — 'black.' We've been given to understand that more lightly pigmented humans tend to look down upon your kind and hold them apart. Is this so?"

Feeling that things were moving a bit too fast for him, Sather said, "In parts of our world it was once true, sir. Generations ago my ancestors were victims of such prejudice. I am not. Present day society is much more enlightened."

"Now that you have had contact — and conflict — with species other than your own?"

"Going out into the galaxy undoubtedly contributed to our ... maturity, sir. But the particular problem you refer to was solved quite some time in the past."

"Interesting. We Llanasans are fortunate in being a homogenous species." Although the inflection in his timbrous voice was nil, the alien's sarcasm was apparent. "On the other hand, mightn't Drake have decided to send someone of relatively low caste on this ... errand? An expendable 'alien' amongst aliens, as it were?"

"I ... hardly think that could be the case, sir."

"So!" Seconds wore by. His Radiance continued to appraise the diplomat as if trying to decide whether he was being argumentative. Then nictitating membranes closed and opened as the Llanasan blinked. "Sather, was 'prejudice' legislated out of existence by your renowned code of laws? We have studied LEX GALACTICUM at length. Truthfully, it seems a hodgepodge of contradictory, loosely word-

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ed statutes. We fail to see how the Terrestrial Imperium, or any more or less sane society, could be governed thusly."

The diplomat squelched an impulse to wipe the film of perspiration from his forehead. "Many provisions of our legal code are traditional rather than institutional — carryovers from the multinational governments of our world's adolescence. As for legislating away ethnic or religious preju —"

"Have you any perception at all," demanded the alien, "what a conceitful implication LEX GALACTICUM conveys for other inhabitants of this, our common galaxy? Why, it's nothing less than an advertisement of human superiority, as though mighty Terra were saying, 'We extend to you benighted barbarians the wisdom inherent in our culture. You may bend to our law and thereby to our rule!'"

"LEX GALACTICUM applies only to humans and humanoids, sir."

"Ah, but does it? Why then, pray, do humans have the effrontery to impose *their* laws upon what they term 'alien' peoples who live — have ever lived — within the swollen, self-serving Imperium?"

As the diplomat groped for an answer — something not too defensive — His Radiance unfolded long arms, gesturing curtly. "Let it pass. We shall discuss the matter at leisure. We are quite weary of Terra, Sather. Have arrangements been made for our comfort?"

Sather drew a breath of relief at his sudden deliverance. "Your quarters await you, sir." He bowed. "The chief steward will conduct your party aft. The ship will depart the instant you advise us everyone is settled. May I say what a distinct pleasure our meeting has been for me. If you desire anything, you have but to ask."

After the somber Llanasans had filed past to vanish in the main transverse passageway, the marine lieutenant grinned with nervous excitement. "Whew! Caught only a word here and there, Mr. Sather. If that tall blue devil isn't the nastiest specimen in the explored universe, I'll chew and swallow my commission!"

"Your intuition is sound," muttered Sather, "and your commission endangered. Bear in mind the standing order, Lieutenant. Llanasan deckspace will be off limits throughout the voyage."

"Aye, sir. I'd hardly forget that."

"See that you don't."

Fifteen minutes later a klaxon groaned to warn of imminent departure. A fluttering in Sather's midriff and a momentary pang of vertigo announced transposition of the starship's thousands of deadweight metric tonnes into the neverland of n-space.

Furiously heated whorls of semivacuum at the hearts of dual fusion tokamaks spun into terawatt-generating life. The conducted whisper of super-excited plasma, bursting at nonrelativistic energy levels from her exhaust nozzles, susurrated through the ship.

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Astraeus fled solar space at some totally unthinkable velocity, crew and precious passengers immune to the equally unthinkable acceleration by virtue of a pseudo-gravity field measuring slightly less than eight-tenths Earth normal.

In subjective minutes the lambent disk representing Sol within the astrogation tank had dwindled to a second-magnitude star.

—

Hastily assembled during the Llanasan War's boom years when Imperial warships had waited days on end for their chance to refuel, Way Station orbited a nameless water world — one of six major bodies and seventeen natural satellites circling a smallish yellow-white star whose official designation consisted of a twelve-digit alphanumeric coding, but whose casual name was Pit Stop. The nearest civilized world, Chalseanne, lay nineteen light-years distant along a nadir, in-galactic geodesic. Beyond Way Station, scattered planetary systems formed the frontier of civilization's sphere of influence, including the primary of a noisome hellhole known as God's Armpit. Much farther out, lost in a maze of thinning stars toward the tip of the spiral arm, was Llanasa.

Way Station had changed since war's end. Four of the seven surface-to-orbit shuttles were mothballed in anticipation of better times and heavier traffic. Although the pay was munificent, duty aboard the station was both monastic and monotonous — natural consequences of automation and the frontier. A metal island floating on the planet's hydrosphere housed an automated plant which extracted deuterium/tritium from ammonia-rich sea water. Three crews rotated shifts, shuttling fuel and deadheads to and from Way Station with tedious regularity. Except for marathon card games and the mediocre entertainment afforded by an ultraband communications link with Chalseanne, there was nothing to do except count the hours.

A triple amputee, the outpost's director had once commanded a ground-assault platoon of Imperial Marines. In Way Station's perpetual freefall he was able to use his mind and leadership skills without demeaning necessity of wearing prosthetic limbs, or without the equally demeaning acceptance of the disability pension his frontier homeworld could ill-afford to pay. The director was napping, drifting untethered between padded bulkheads in his quarters, when the man on watch in the communications compartment roused him.

"Rise'n shine! We got inbound traffic with big troubles."

The director snuffled. "Nothing scheduled, is there?"

"Uh-uh. Not for more'n a hundred standard hours. This boat's puttin' out a Mayday signal — awful weak, but readable."

"Ultraband?"

"Nope. Plain ol' UHF. Like I say, sig-

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nal's pretty faint."

The director yawned. "Okay, let's see what's stirring." He snagged a free-fall line with his single hand. Legless, clad only in a pullover, he whisked himself effortlessly from the cubicle.

In three standard hours the distress call was stronger, acknowledging Way Station's answering transmission, advising that the ship would be able to limp in under its own power. One fusion tokamak was down, hence the unexpected arrival was wallowing through Einsteinian space, its relative velocity mere kilometers-per-second.

A dozen more hours passed before the stranger became a visual object in Way Station's imaging radar tank.

"Mighty lucky bunch," mused the director, "whoever they are."

"And how!" The communications tech wagged his head. "If it'd happened a light-year out, they could've written themselves off."

Later still, when Major Luken's saturnine features jelled in the video tank, the director greeted him with diffidence. "Glad you made it," he said, relieved to find himself confronted by a human face. "Don't wish to seem inhospitable, but we'll require your cypher identity and hull registry number before allowing you to make orbit."

Lukens grinned disarmingly through the transmission lag. "Or be shot down in flames?"

"No choice; our weapons systems stand-by on full automatic. Regulations," said the director, not returning the grin. "Now, then, who'n hell are you? Why're you vectoring toward Way Station without filing ultraband clearance through Chalseanne?"

"Easy, friend. Back off." Looking disgruntled, Lukens shoved a plasticized badge in front of the pickup. "Recognize it?"

The director took in the Imperial sunburst, the coded symbols of authority. "Um-m-m, you'd appear to be Terran CIC."

"The very same," said Lukens after the lag. "'Fraid we've got to remain anonymous. We're doing a sweep ahead of the VIP vessel you're expecting. Don't think I should say more over the air."

The director scowled, seemingly unconvinced. "Flashing credentials over video's one thing," he said slowly, "and verifying your paperwork up close, another. Fair enough. I'll lock-out our weapons systems for your approach. But I'll want to see full accreditation before you enter the station, or...."

Luken's laugh boomed gustily. "Pal, after thoughts of dying slowly back there in the dark we're so damned glad to find a warm place to squat that dodging missiles sounds almost cheery."

"Meet you at the airlock," said the director.

"And I'll have the papers in my hot little hand. Over and out."

Hours later, when the airlock cy-

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cled to reveal him and the dozen armed troopers crowding close behind him, Major Lukens showed the director only the emission bell of his hand laser.

"Whatever you want," said the director woodenly, "you won't get it. I didn't buy your whole yarn, mister. Two men're out in the ultraband module, waiting for me to cue them. Once the module transposes into n-space to communicate, your ship with its damaged tokamak can't touch it."

Lukens clucked in disgust. "My, but you're a suspicious fella! A shame you bought the wrong part of my tale. Our dual toks are both fine and healthy." Lukens whispered something to a trooper, who immediately whirled and flew back through the umbilical tube, then motioned for his men to collect the station's personnel and herd them together in the commissary compartment.

"I'm waiting," said the director. "What'll I tell my men?"

Lukens sighed. "Alas, you're no longer able to tell them anything. The ultraband module's been vaporized, friend."

The director flinched visibly when a pair of Kree drifted from the umbilical tube connecting Way Station with the intruding starship. He whipped himself around to confront Lukens, the color creeping upward in his neck. "You treasonous renegade bastard!"

"It'd pay you to be extra polite," observed the major quietly.

The Kree pulled themselves inboard, regarding the director with gelid fixity. "Have they divulged their cypher drill, the ultraband frequency currently in use?" demanded the spokesman.

"Not yet," said Lukens. "How about it, chum?"

"Pigs! You get *nothing* from me."

An armored, six-dactyled hand shot out, closed around the director's throat. The man's remaining fingers scratched ineffectually at taloned digits. With a roundhouse whipping motion, the Kree hurled the director's abbreviated frame to impact cruelly against the open airlock. The smashed body rebounded aimlessly, blood from a ruptured artery spurting to form globules which the life-support blowers wafted about the stunned silence of the compartment.

"Okay," invited Major Lukens, "who else feels talkative?"

The inquisition lasted one standard hour, producing any number of low-pitched masculine screams.

Then the slaughter began in earnest.

"It's ... a great honor," said Sather in an unsteady voice.

His Radiance's armored countenance remained inscrutable — the mask of Tragedy in ancient Greek drama. "Since you professed an intent to live among us, one supposed moving you in here was coincident with your wishes. Are the quarters satisfactory?"

"Just ... fine," said the diplomat,

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quailing inside. The E Deck cubicle assigned to him was actually a duplicate of his former room midships. But *outside* his new quarters....

The steward had toted his bags, setting them down with obsequious care. An out-of-uniform marine noncom had opened the hatch, snapping a smart salute across his chest from force of habit, and Sather had carried his luggage into deckspace peopled by sapient beings from a star so distant that its light, falling on Terra, had been emitted when proto-humans still huddled in firelit caves.

He had not been "invited to dinner." Ingesting food in the presence of others was, to Llanasans, a despicably repulsive custom. But, to Sather's acute embarrassment, coupling was not.

He'd walked scarcely twenty meters along the main passageway before coming upon a Llanasan pair engaged in violent sexual encounter — a situation for which no amount of protocol training would have prepared a human being with normal emotions. Red-faced, Sather had stepped around the writhing pair, stumbling into his new cubicle in a state of profound shock.

Although given to understand that His Radiance was expecting him, many minutes had passed before Sather was able to conquer his roiling emotions to the point of venturing in search of the alien leader. He'd found the envoy alone in his suite, looking pensive and relaxed.

Ten standard hours earlier, *Astraeus* had emerged into the normal continuum some sixty-seven diameters from Pit Stop, receiving immediate clearance to enter orbit, and had maneuvered to rendezvous with Way Station. When the zero-gee warning beeped, His Radiance waved the diplomat toward a lounge, buckling his own restraint harness. The disorientation of weightlessness soon added itself to Sather's other woes.

"How long shall we remain here?" asked the alien.

"Just long enough to refuel, sir — a matter of hours. I'm to file a report via ultraband. Have you anything you might wish to add?"

"Nothing, Sather. The voyage has been uneventful. You may of course convey our warmest regards to Secretary Drake."

"Gladly, sir." Sather fidgeted, finally screwing up his courage to the point of mentioning his discomfiture at learning the startling — to humans — openness of Llanasan sex life.

As usual, His Radiance pulled no punches. "Sharing is all," he said in an offhand manner. "Your reaction displays a certain shallowness of attitude. We Llanasans are forced to accept the necessity of sharing whenever and wherever the occasion demands."

Sather was ruminating the response when a faint popping sound announced activation of the starship's intercom. Amid a babble of excited voices, he thought he heard someone shout,

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"Get him!" Then the intercom circuit died.

"Trouble?" Sather unbelted, glancing uncertainly at the towering alien. "Perhaps I'd better go and —"

"Stay where you are!" With surprising grace for such an apparently fragile creature, His Radiance freed himself and crossed the compartment on the fly, vanishing into the passageway.

Sather hesitated, raddled with indecision. The Llanasan had been adamant about wanting him to stay put, however.... Distant sounds chilled him — the unmistakable high-frequency hiss of a laser weapon accompanied by muted shouting.

The passageway was deserted. Clumsily, Sather locked his freefall boots to the velcro deck matting and moved toward the entrance to E Deck, regarding with suspicion each closed door he passed. The ship was silent now. Ominously silent.

"Stand!" The hoarse command had been uttered by a stranger clad in gray-green dungarees; the emission bell of his laser rifle was focused on Sather's midriff. Behind the man, three other armed humans swarmed into the passage.

"Face the bulkhead, hands high!"

Limbs quivering, Sather did as he was told.

He was roughly searched. When the searcher was satisfied, he grabbed Sather's arm, thrusting him toward the others. "Who're you?"

"My name is Sather."

"Really don't care a hoot about your name, Jack. Who *are* you?"

Tersely, Sather explained his presence.

"You're the Terran who's babysittin' these unfriendlies?"

"That's ... one way of putting it."

"Don't get cute!" The trooper smacked his lips in thought. "Okay, bounce him up to the conning bridge. Tell Luke who he is. I'll stay below decks an' see the moppin' up goes right."

A pair of armed men herded Sather along the passageway. Three dead Llanasans were drifting near the entrance to E Deck. The life-support system had not yet cleared the gagging stench of burnt flesh from the air.

Numbed, Sather rode the elevator under the close watch of his captors. When they emerged at bridge level, he almost retched. The young lieutenant of marines was the first human body he saw, sliced nearly in two by a laser beam. Several members of his squad were strewn behind him like boneless mannequins.

The starship's bridge formed a tableau. Grouped near the clustered bridge officers, His Radiance and four other Llanasans faced an assortment of hard-eyed, gray-green-clad troopers, foremost of whom was a heavy-set man whose stubbled cheek was scarred.

"What've we here?" demanded Major Lukens.

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His waning terror replaced by outraged indignation, Sather interrupted the trooper's explanation. "In the name of the Imperium," he said, wincing at the theatrical sound of it, "I warn you of —"

"Shut up!" Lukens bared tobacco-stained teeth. "Over with the others, and step lively! I'm only a businessman, mate. This here's nothing more than a business deal. Besides, your high'n mighty Imperium is a helluva lot of parsecs away."

"You'll find it has a long arm," said the diplomat lamely.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure." Thoroughly unimpressed, Lukens again ordered him to get over with the others and keep quiet.

Sather high-stepped across the deck matting to stand disconsolately beside the grouped Llanasans.

"It would seem Terran security has grown rather lax," said His Radiance with measured intonation.

"H-have they told you what they want, sir?"

"Since they are humans, one might suggest that you yourself attempt to discover...." The Llanasan envoy broke off in midsentence. One of his alien companions emitted a strangling sound.

"Kree!"

Two monstrosities had pulled their way into the conning bridge.

Armored mammals, like grossly exaggerated caricatures of Llanasans, the entrants were far stockier and more squat, much less finely sculpted than their distant cousins. Protruding gelid eyes gave the impression of touchiness easily fanned into fury, of latent cruelty lurking just beneath a façade of stolidity.

"Thy radiance hath somehow dimmed," said the nearer Kree in Llanasan. *"Art the mighty then brought so low?"*

Sather anxiously awaited the envoy's rejoinder. His Radiance continued to contemplate the Kree with absolute aplomb.

"What troubles thee, O Radiant One? Hath recent travail struck thee speechless?"

"Small profit obtaineth from converse with lower creatures," said His Radiance softly.

The Kree erupted a barking sound Sather interpreted as laughter. *"Thy discomfort raiseth astonishing levels of pleasure within one's soul. Free thyself from craven fear, O Radiant One. Thy miserable existence hath not yet run its course."*

"Ah, but thine hath." His Radiance sounded coolly confident. *"Of soul, thou knowest not."*

The Kree laughed again — a petulant sound not unlike that of a fractious dog penned too long in a kennel. *"Empty threats, like empty vessels, leaveth thirst unslaked. Doth thy meaning relate to punishments prescribed by the 'law' of these puny, pale Terrans?"*

"Thou'rt the dead," said Sather,

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surprised at the rage in his voice.

The Kree spokesman turned toward Sather, the blaze of viscous eyes heightening in intensity. "*Your* death," he said, lapsing into Lingua Stella, "will be slow and deliciously wrought. But not yet.

"Man!" The Kree snapped armored fingers, producing a sound like stainless steel castanets. "Who commands this craft?"

"Him." Lukens gestured with his laser rifle.

"Move over there," directed the Kree, pointing.

After Captain Fourgas had stepped obediently to one side, the Kree raised his laser rifle and burned him down where he stood. A hushed expectancy smothered the conning bridge. The spokesman's rifle swung slowly past the grouped men and Llanasans.

"I have done what I have done for two reasons," rattled the Kree with staccato emphasis. "Firstly, I have proved to you — if added proof was needed — that we are wholly dedicated to the success of this enterprise; secondly, that we are acquainted with Terran ways. Their code of law demands an autodestruct mechanism for each Terran craft. I have disarmed the device by eliminating its trigger, for commanding officers are invariably burdened with such duties.

"There will be no further unnecessary killing," pursued the Kree. "Comport yourselves properly, and you shall live. You have my solemn promise."

It was His Radiance's turn to bray sarcastically. "As if the pledge of a Kree were something of value!"

"I am utterly sincere," insisted the spokesman. "When our demands are met, O Radiant One, you will be released."

"Your demands will be ignored," said Sather. "If you've learned anything of LEX GALACTICUM, you're aware of its inflexibility. As hostages, we are the dead. So are you for having killed us."

"Vain posturing!" The Kree loomed with menace. "Your whining grows wearisome, Man. Even worse, your naiveté. Do you imagine the Imperium will throw away the myriad lives sacrificed in recent warfare because of a mere statute? Laws are made to be broken."

"Not ours," said the diplomat through gritted teeth.

"Enough!" Disdainfully, the Kree gestured to Lukens. "Instruct your warriors to separate the Llanasan females and children. Put the Terrans with the males. We shall see, in a few dozen standard hours, whether Llanasan pomposity suffers through the separation."

"Aye, sir."

"And, Man," added the spokesman, "you are to personally search their quarters for hidden weapons before allowing the prisoners to enter. The responsibility is entirely yours."

Lukens nodded. "I'll double check."

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"Excellent! Meet with us aboard our vessel when the deed is done. The first ultraband transmission will be dispatched immediately." Pausing to fix His Radiance with a stinging glare, the Kree pulled his bulk from the bridge, followed by his mute companion.

Terran Secretary for Alien Affairs Alan R. Drake was working on the speech he was due to give before the Outworld Committee on Thursday. At least that's what he'd told his personal secretary an hour earlier, ordering her not to disturb him until shortly before his appointment with the Federated Western Hemisphere's Chief Consul later that afternoon.

Actually, Drake had long since switched off the voicewriter. He was dozing in the high-backed armchair behind his desk when a woman burst into the inner office without knocking. "Mr. Secretary!"

"Eh?" Drake cleared his throat, blinking repeatedly.

"Please, Alan," whispered the woman, bending close beside the armchair. "Dr. Cameron is here. And ... some others."

The official sat upright, yawning. Uninvited, Cameron had already appeared in the doorway. "Come in, John," called Drake, now fully revived. "My dear, will you ask whoever else is out there to please wait until I learn what this is all about?"

"Certainly, Mr. Secretary." The woman bustled into the foyer, closing the door behind her.

"What is it, John? Will we need the security net?"

Dr. John Cameron, whom Sather had known briefly as the armorer, shook his head with a hangdog air. "Too late to worry about that. The ultraband signal came in unscrambled from Chalseanne via the Gamma Crucis links. Half of civilization knows about it already. The grapevine here in Terra will take care of the rest."

Secretary Drake shrank from the look of dull agony in the psychiatrist's level brown eyes. He rose abruptly and came around the desk with purpose. "For heaven's sake, John! Tell me!"

Stiffly, choosing his words with care, the doctor outlined what little had been learned about the hijacking.

"*Astraeus* — my God!" Clenching and unclenching his fists, Drake lurched toward the large picture window across the office. He moved like a sleepwalker, breathing stertorously.

The forested hills of western Pennsylvania were exhibiting delicate hues of russet and yellow-bronze foliage in the crisp autumn air. Terra was once again a garden, most heavy industry having moved into cislunar space, and beyond, a century or more before Drake was born. The official allowed the pastoral landscape to soothe him for a moment before wheeling. "I had a premonition of something like this," he said, pain in his voice. "Has it been verified?"

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The doctor's confirming nod was bleak. "They gave *Astraeus's* hull number and cypher identity, adding that of Way Station for good measure. They furnished names and backgrounds of the hostages. His name was included, so I've assumed Sather's still among the living. I have also assumed that there were many casualties."

"Um, naturally, naturally...." Drake popped a fist into his open palm. He took to prowling the carpet, hands clasped behind him.

The psychiatrist coughed politely. "LEX GALACTICUM will —"

"Don't, John! Don't even suggest it. I won't hear it. Tell me, did the message also mention Captain Fourgas by name?"

"I'm afraid not. Sather's probably the only triggerman left."

Drake appraised the other searchingly. "You never endorsed the notion of dual triggerman, did you?"

"No," said the doctor, "never. High psychological risks are involved in ensuring one individual's capability of handling such an inhuman assignment. Asking for two was...."

"Yes, yes. Professionally speaking, I'm sure you were quite correct. But are you confident of Sather? He seems so ... so damned young. Are you certain he'll pull the plug?"

"If he becomes deeply convinced it's necessary, he will act," said the other with a good deal of assurance. "Sather *is* young. He was only marginally acceptable to your selection board for conduct of the diplomatic functions, if you'll recall.

"But you read my report, Alan. For my purposes he's a classic, textbook specimen. His threshold of irritation is inordinately high. I needled him unmercifully during the switch drill, and he didn't even quibble. When it comes to placing the good of the whole above his own continued existence, Sather ranks in the upper fiftieth percentile of all diplomatic candidates."

"Comforting," murmured the older man, who obviously hadn't been listening. Drake pouched his cheeks in thought. "These hijackers, what exactly are their demands?"

"Here." Cameron unfolded a communications printout, smoothing it on the other's desktop. "Read them for yourself."

The secretary plopped down hurriedly. He skimmed the flimsy sheet, then went back and read it more thoroughly. When he looked up, he had grown quite pale. His manner was even more grave than before. "You didn't see fit to mention this ... other matter."

"The, er, threat, should we fail to comply, to inform Llanasa it was we who destroyed *Astraeus?* How could human or humanoid pirates hope to convince a distant, alien government that we —?"

"Humanoid?" Drake's head jerked adamantly from side to side. "No, no, John. You've missed something. Neith-

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er humans, nor humanoids had anything to do with inventing *these* demands. Mere money? Freeing that ship and its hostages is beyond price. Ignore the demand for money.

"Here's the crux. They're asking return of the Achumate and Concrellin systems to Imperial jurisdiction — nothing short of a pure incentive for Llanasa to renew hostilities. Achumate and Concrellin saw the vilest, most decimating ground battles of the war. For Llanasa to even contemplate giving up either would be...."

Drake groaned, placing his head in his hands. "They have us by the short hairs," he said in a voice laden with misery. "Whether we and the Llanasan Hegemony decide to knuckle under and agree to their demands — possibly saving the hostages, although I harbor deep misgivings — or whether we stand fast and allow Sather to ... do his job, the net result will be the same.

"Our single chance lies in alerting the military in Chalseanne and hoping against hope they get frightfully lucky and intercept *Astraeus* before the ... finale."

"In *n-space?*" Cameron sounded incredulous. "That's not a hope at all. Detecting a starship cruising in the normal continuum is next to impossible. In n-space that ship could be *anywhere.*"

"I know, I know! Nevertheless, we must try. I'll implore the Chief Consul to convene an emergency session of the Outworld Committee. We must contact Llanasa — somehow."

Drake stared grimly at the psychiatrist. "And we *must* find that ship. I fear that failure will mean resumption of the Llanasan War."

Shipboard "days" passed slowly. Luken's troopers brought their thrice-daily meals, returning to roll away the galley carts filled with soiled trays. The renegades began using extra precautions as the restless hours of imprisonment wore on, posting four men at the entrance to E Deck with orders to fire on any hostage who so much as poked his nose into the passageway.

The major himself began supervising the wheeling-in and retrieval of carts, rarely uttering more than a terse command. His skittishness at conducting the operation became more pronounced as the Llanasans grew noticeably beset by sexual discomfort. The alien males and humans had grouped themselves in two mutually distrustful camps, commingling not at all. Sather had elected to stay with the aliens, partly out of a sense of duty, mostly because of nagging guilt feelings over what had been allowed to befall *Astraeus* and its vital mission.

Although he managed to stay clear of the alien conferences, the Terran diplomat watched with chagrin each time His Radiance gathered the surviving members of his delegation around him. It wasn't difficult to guess their nature; the Llanasan envoy was ready-

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ing his confederates for an assault on Luken's armed professionals, an assault which could only end in disaster. But the diplomat sympathized with the decision. For Llanasans, any option at all seemed preferable to berserk madness and an agonizing death.

One "evening" after dinner, when troopers arrived to retrieve the galley carts, Sather was startled to hear Lukens address him in Anglo-Terran. Although obviously born and bred in the outworlds, the man looked human to nine decimals. "C'n I ask you something?"

Sather eyed the mercenary skeptically. "Talk's cheap."

"What the hell's eatin' these unfriendlies?" said Lukens. "Why are they so damned jumpy? Every time we come in, they seem worse."

"You mean you don't know? The Kree — with your conscientious help — are keeping them apart from their females."

"So what?" said Lukens.

"So this! If they really intend to release us, why are the Kree subjecting Llanasans to insanity and a torturous death?"

"Insanity? Death?" Lukens acted genuinely perplexed. "You've had all your programs erased, mate. What the hey! Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder. Everybody knows that."

"Not in *their* case." Using very basic terms, Sather explained the incredible — to humans — Llanasan biological drive.

There was deviltry in the mercenary's sudden grin. "Puttin' me on, aren't you? Listen, I've been ragged by experts."

"I'm in dead earnest." Rapidly, Sather sketched events leading up to conclusion of the Llanasan War of Misunderstanding.

Lukens whistled softly. "Always knew Mother Nature was a real bitch, but *that* tops all. I've heard of screwed up sex lives before, but...." The man's eyes narrowed. "If you're giving me the straight skinny, how come no one else knows about 'em?"

"The facts haven't been widely advertised," admitted Sather, "out of respect for their sensitivity. Llanasans are proud, disdainful of weakness in any form. They refuse to discuss any aspect of sexuality. We didn't learn the details ourselves until truce negotiations were degenerating. Military ET experts tore their hair for years trying to discover what caused Llanasan berserkers. They suspected drugs, trance conditioning, and so on, but never —"

"Berserkers!" The emission bell of Lukens' hand laser never wavered, but his blue eyes defocused in thought.

The laser was suddenly whipped to one side. "Hold it there!"

Unnoticed, His Radiance had come to stand at Sather's shoulder. "One merely thought to join the discussion," said the alien in fair Anglo-Terran. "The adage has it that 'practice makes perfect.'"

"I'll be dipped in...! Hearing the

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mother tongue from the likes of you surely does unsettle a man." Lukens scratched his chin reflectively. "Eavesdropping's a fearful bad habit, but one I'll gladly forgive if you'll be kind enough to confirm, or scotch, what this bo's been telling me."

Amber cat's eyes gleaming with banked fires of indignation, the alien did not speak for a dozen heartbeats. Lukens wilted under his steadfast gaze. "The subject is one of pre-eminent distaste. However, since you are alien beings and the matter is of some import, it seems appropriate to substantiate the essentials of what Sather has told you. Even so, he is aware only of superficials."

"*Aliens* — us?" Lukens acted put upon.

"Humans are every whit as alien to us as we are to them. Perhaps much more so. While the Kree are —"

"N'mind the Kree." The mercenary shot a guilty glance rearward. "Let's hear more about these berserkers."

His Radiance cogitated once again before framing a reply. "On your race's homeworld," he said at last, "evolutionary processes have resulted in a remarkable diversity of life forms. If memory serves, the catch phrase 'survival of the fittest' applies to each Terran species, your own included. But Terra is by our standards a gentle, forgiving planet. In Llanasa, the phrase might be amended thusly: 'only the fittest of the fittest survive.'

"To outsiders, our world might seem vile and inhospitable. Our evolutionary development reflects such a harsh environment precisely. The reproductive drive with which we are endowed guarantees that only the most vigorous and strong-willed males will earn continuous access to females, that only the fittest females will be even mildly inclined to receive them. Spilling one's seed upon the ground or consorting with members of one's own sexual polarity, are considered cowardly abominations, worthy of the ostracism and extinction they soon bring."

"And when the pain gets to be too much," said Major Lukens in awe, "berserkers!"

"It is a natural consequence," said His Radiance.

"Sonovabitch! The carrot and the stick! We got dealt the carrot, and you — the stick." Lukens moistened his lips. He shuffled backward, glancing to make sure his troopers had finished removing the galley carts. Only six members of the squad remained, covering the groupings of men and Llanasans with sharp-eyed vigilance. "We'll be taking our leave now. I'm, er, obliged to you, mate. You've cleared up a mystery that's bothered me for quite a spell."

"One moment!" Sather was warned back by a flourish of laser weapons. "Think what segregation means. The Kree have installed a time bomb aboard this ship, and the bomb is fuzed, primed."

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Intended to be insouciant, the major's forced grin fell somewhat short. "Let's not disparage my employers, eh? Told you I was just a businessman. They've made me rich."

"You will not survive to spend one minim of the treasure," said His Radiance with somber conviction.

Lukens paused, looking uncomfortable. The fact that the conversation was being held in Anglo-Terran kept only a few of the troopers from understanding. "The loot's already deposited to my ... to our accounts," he said in a small voice.

"Having valuta deposited in one's name," said His Radiance, "and living to withdraw it are not necessarily compatible. We of Llanasa know the Kree for what they are — vicious, degenerate animals. They seek unnatural pleasure in perpetrating any crime."

"Tut!" said Lukens. "I'll not allow besmirchment of my employers' good name. See you at breakfast." The last of the troopers exited. E Deck's hatch was battened, locked from outside.

Thinking to ask a question, Sather found the alien studying him balefully, latent rage in his manner. "What ... is it, sir?"

"Thank you very much, Sather! Your aim may have been altruistic — an attempt to remedy the situation, one presumes. All you have accomplished is to remove any small element of surprise our unavoidable future condition may have once given us."

The diplomat swallowed with difficulty. "Berserk or not, sir, jumping armed men would be ... suicidal."

"Yet it would seem our only path to survival. Indeed, perhaps the single method of avoiding something infinitely worse."

Sather was forced to look away. Apology in his tone, he said, "Have I your permission to enlist the aid of the other humans?"

"That depends," said His Radiance. "As you've suggested, many will die. Are you yourself prepared for that? Will fear numb your mind, paralyze your limbs?"

"I ... yes. I will be afraid, sir. I admit it."

"Welcome news! Only the brave have sufficient courage to acknowledge fear. We shall plan conjointly and with great care. My technical aide has discovered numerous electronic surveillance devices hidden within these compartments. The devious Kree imbibe sadism with their mother's milk; they would witness our suffering in order to seek unnatural pleasure. We've been speaking Anglo-Terran, and a reasonable certainty exists that the Kree know not your difficult native tongue. The rogue who was with us a moment ago has not yet had time to rejoin them, hence.... Tomorrow," said His Radiance sternly, "when sustenance is brought to us, we shall be ready."

Tactics were established in vain. No troopers entered E Deck next "morning." The carts were left standing out-

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side the hatchway. Volunteers — all humans — were invited to come out and wheel them inside if they wanted to be fed, covered the while by a crossfire of laser weapons that would have incinerated them en masse in the event of a threatening move.

As evidenced by the added precaution, Sather's enlightening words had obviously caused Lukens to do some astute pondering. Keeping order among potential berserkers was not an activity courted by any military commander.

His Radiance's manner turned icy. He declined to acknowledge Sather's existence, refusing to speak to him for the remainder of the "day." The diplomat sought his foldbunk that night, desolated by towering apprehensions and an even sharper sense of guilt.

Sleep eluded him. Hour after agonizing hour he tossed and turned beside the naked titanium bulkhead, fingering the lethal switches implanted below either jawbone, his thoughts turning toward Death in all its multifarious guises and manifestations.

Not at heart a religious man, Sather nevertheless found himself praying for divine guidance. He and he alone would have to decide when the clean white nonexistence of thermonuclear holocaust became preferable to the loathsome finale he was now certain the Kree had planned for them all along.

* * *

"Nothing yet, John?" Secretary Drake rubbed swollen eyes. His restless slumber had been induced by drugs administered under duress at the order of Dr. Cameron and had not refreshed him at all.

"Nothing," said Cameron glumly. The psychiatrist had been in attendance over two hours, waiting for Drake to awaken.

"And ... Chalseanne?"

"Full mobilization is under way, groundside. Both fleets are in transit for Way Station. The ships will refuel, then begin search operations at once. But finding the proverbial needle would be an odds-on bet by comparison. Turning up *Astraeus* isn't realistic. I'd hate to think you've pinned much faith on their ability to —"

"Dammit, John!" The older man flung aside the coverlet, leaping from the fluid-filled mattress with alacrity. "Don't say that. The fleet's all we have. If only I were able to rush Out There and come to grips with the problem firsthand...."

"It'd be overlong before you could arrive," said the doctor.

"Um, the *Astraeus* affair would certainly be concluded, true. I wasn't thinking entirely of that."

"War?"

"War!" Drake sought his robe, thanking the manservant who brought a cup of steaming *chai* into the bedchamber. "I was stuck here behind a desk all through the last one, stuck like some ... some mountebank! I couldn't

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suffer through those terrible reports again day after day, unable to seize the nettle, completely impotent in the face of never-ending death and destruction."

"You torment yourself to no purpose," said the doctor. "What's happened aboard *Astraeus* was not your fault." His expression concerned, Cameron listened to the teacup chatter in the saucer as Drake lifted it halfway to his lips.

"Fault!" said Drake acidly. "Interstellar warfare occupies such a vast stage, is so abysmally expensive in lives and materials that no single individual can comprehend it, let alone shoulder the blame. Besides, 'blame' is for God and small children.

"But you were correct all along, John. Searching n-space for *Astraeus* is futility itself. I've been clutching at straws — a losing game for anyone, and an idiot's game for someone in my profession. Llanasa has neglected to answer our transmissions, so...."

The Terran Secretary for Alien Affairs whirled impulsively and flung the cupful of tea at an unoffending wall papered in tasteful amethyst fabric. The cup and saucer shattered just beneath a portrait of the Federated Western Hemisphere's Chief Consul. An evil, brownish stain seeped downward. "Felt I ... had to do that."

"I think it was rather a good notion," said Dr. Cameron.

"Do you recommend other therapies?"

"By all means hurl another cup of tea if you like."

"Um." Drake nodded, tears in his eyes. "John, I'd forfeit every accomplishment of a lifetime, every possession I own, for just *one* glimpse of what's happening this instant aboard *Astraeus!*"

The first Llanasan berserker cracked without warning.

Sitting in the privacy of his cubicle, consuming his midday meal with lonely aplomb, he suddenly wailed as only a distraught Llanasan can wail and rushed out to belabor with flailing arms those companions who had already finished eating.

Sather was knocked rudely aside. He crashed against the bulkhead and stayed down, massaging a bruised elbow. Casual use of the term "berserker" bore no relationship to witnessing a live demonstration. The stricken Llanasan writhed in the grips of three companions who were hard put to restrain him. His keening rose in pitch to become a red roar of fury.

Another pair of aliens rushed to aid the berserker. They were cast aside like matchstick figures. Four more charged to take their places. Even so, it was nip and tuck as the knot of struggling figures careened back and forth across the compartment.

Crooning in an unearthly key, the berserker was at last subdued by the concerted efforts of a half-dozen comrades. Wordlessly, they held him down.

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A Llanasan bent to press some nerve or blood vessel until the unfortunate lost consciousness.

Shocked to the core, Sather picked himself up.

His Radiance had allowed his lieutenants to handle the incident without interfering. "He is the first," said the envoy. "Soon there will be others. It is a natural consequence."

"Can we ... do something?" asked Sather, husky-voiced.

"No, although perhaps...." His Radiance fell silent at a subdued popping sound from the starship's intercom system.

"How fares it with thee, O Radiant One?"

The lisping Kree voice made Sather's hackles rise. Overlarge mouth drawn back in a rictus exposing his canines, a feral growl escaped the alien plenipotentiary.

"Hath a paucity of sharing already begun to exact its toll?"

"Say nought!" whispered the Llanasan in Anglo-Terran.

After an interlude of pregnant silence, the intercom circuit died. The Terran diplomat's arm was caught in a grip of steel. "When human warriors come to retrieve the meal carts, you and three others must carry out the trays. Prearrange some signal, then push the carts aside as one man and fall to the floor. Allow us an aisle up the center of the passageway."

"You'll be cut down," warned Sather.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Life is a gift to be cherished, but not at the expense of ignominy and degradation. We have chosen our ending. Should fortune favor us, many disreputable ones will escort us into the Putrid Pit. Will you reaffirm your offer of aid?"

"We'll be right behind you, sir." Sather's imagination built a vivid picture of a suicidal charge against massed lasers.

Later, he chose a pair of Imperial Marines and one of the ship's officers to accompany him. All three men seemed delighted by prospects of breaking the stalemate, whatever the risk.

The four humans stacked dinner trays as usual, waiting anxiously beside the hatch. Lukens and his men arrived to open E Deck. The prisoners toted out the food-stained trays. A quick glance along the passageway caused Sather to drop his load.

The troopers had fallen back some twenty meters, the front rank prone, second rank kneeling, third rank standing, covering the area with a fan of firepower a gnat couldn't hope to penetrate. Between the mercenaries and carts, an array of eight unarmed Kree stood poised in two rows across the main transverse passageway.

Sather was given no opportunity to whistle — the prearranged signal. The curdling whoop of a Llanasan warcry echoed through the confined space. The Llanasan berserker hurtled past, bowling over Sather and one of the

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galley carts in a clatter of metal trays. At his heels were the other eleven aliens.

Sather rolled to his knees. A battle royal was in progress.

Amazingly, the berserker bolted headlong into a much more stocky Kree, and the monster went down before his charge. Then the wave of Llanasans broke upon close-packed Kree ranks. It was difficult to sort out the action in a melee of flashing armored limbs. If the Kree were larger and presumably stronger, the Llanasans were much quicker. Sather was hypnotized by lightning thrusts which would have pulverized a human torso. Both species of exoskeletal mammal were relatively vulnerable in the unarmored abdomen and groin, plus a small triangular area on either side of the neck where the shoulder plates failed to butt. A favorite Kree tactic seemed to be to lift a lighter opponent bodily and dash him against the bulkhead. The Kree fought in stony silence. Llanasan war whoops soon dwindled, fading into a cacophony of straining grunts.

Then a triumphant Llanasan bellow shredded the passageway. The berserker, who had prostrated his original opponent, fought past the Kree and raced down upon Lukens and his men.

A laser beam sliced off his left leg just below the knee. The berserk warrior skidded on his belly, still howling.

Sather was then permitted to witness something so strange and wonderful that ever afterward he marveled at the memory. The fallen berserker used his hands to lever himself upright. With an ululating shriek surpassing all others, he *hopped* on toward the mercenaries until converging energy needles cut him down forever.

The furious hiss of massed laser fire seemed to signal the end of combat. The Kree hurriedly withdrew toward Lukens and his men, abandoning four fallen companions. Only five Llanasans were able to return, dragging a pair of wounded. The humans did what they could to help, then the hatch was pulled closed.

Sather almost lost his supper at sight of His Radiance's crushed forearm; a froth of carmine also graced the corners of his mouth. But a glow of exhilaration burned within the cat's eyes.

"Can I help, sir?" Sather winced. "Your ... arm."

"A small thing," said His Radiance. "It is of minor concern."

"You were ... magnificent!"

"How kind you are, Sather. The perverted beasts erred in waiting too long. Seeking sport, they underestimated the progress of our ... condition." The Llanasan coughed, steeled himself against the agony of his chest. "There is great danger for you now. You humans must lock yourselves in your quarters at once."

"I don't... Why, sir?"

"We shan't be allowed to see the base animals again," said His Radiance, "nor will we be offered further sustenance. You must protect your-

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selves as best you can until ... the end."

"Protect...? Afraid I still don't understand, sir. How can we possibly protect ourselves against the Kree?"

"Not against them, Sather. Against us. One of my comrades — he who entered the Putrid Pit with such glorious élan — had already gone over the edge. Others will follow in due course. It is a natural consequence. In that state, we will not be responsible for our actions. The Kree animals hope to sit in audience and enjoy the circus. Do you follow my meaning?"

Chilled, Sather finally realized what must be done.

During the last hours, the diplomat took out his life, dusted it off, and examined it.

The next-to-last quandary, the penultimate mental hurdle he ever need face, would be to determine which was to be the final minute, the final instant. The Kree had surely established some sort of time frame for meeting their demands, whatever they were.

He had no idea what that time frame might be, but a pervasive certainty that all but a few grains of sand had trickled from the glass welled inside him. How long to wait, yet not wait too long?

Inanely, a scene from an epic holodrama he'd once enjoyed popped before his mind's eye. The hero, a "railroad man" of Earth's legendary Old West, was preparing to save his sweetheart from "a fate worse than death" by using the single remaining bullet in his six-gun, desperate to prevent besieging aborigines from capturing her and committing unspeakable atrocities upon her sacred person. Just as he placed the revolver's muzzle to his beloved's head, the haunting whistle of a rescuing train sounded in the distance. The hero had nearly fainted, contemplating the irrevocable act he'd come within a whisker of perpetrating.

Out here, lost in the multidimensional immensity of n-space, rescuing "trains" might be few and far between. Much more likely than a faint, blood-stirring hoot of salvation would be the pounding of armored, ham-like fists on the door of his cubicle. Once berserk madness had overtaken the majority of Llanasans, Kree jackals would come to pounce on the surviving humans.

And that vindictive, bloated monstrosity of a Kree spokesman had promised Sather something *special* in the way of lingering death.

The Terran shuddered, having never considered himself a particularly brave individual. The most sublime courage would pale before such a prospect. It would take far greater courage to wait passively for the Kree than to scrunch his shoulders and roll his head several times to the left, several times to the right....

How long to wait, yet not wait too long?

He sat perfectly still on the edge of the foldbunk, listening. A low-pitched,

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almost subliminal susurration conducted forward from the ship's n-space reaction drive and the sough of air flowing from the life-support louvers, barely broke the intense quiet. There had been no hint of a commotion outside his cubicle during the twenty-odd hours of his confinement.

Sather realized for the first time that he was hungry, thirsty. He had forgotten such luxuries of everyday existence because of the ceaseless barrage of remembered sense impressions, the echoing snatches of long-vanished conversations crowding past the inner window of his consciousness.

He thought mostly of Marilyn, of the balmy breeze off the Pacific that evening on the beach in Maui when she'd finally agreed to a marriage contract — an unlimited contract, sans reservations. He thought of the exultant weariness in his limbs, the fire in his lungs and the acrid taste of chlorinated water during the final sprint which had won him the Denver City Schools' hundred-meter freestyle championship. He thought of long-stemmed roses in a crystal vase and of their cloying scent; of the eiderdown comforter at the quaint Bavarian inn where he and Marilyn had honeymooned; of pretzels and beer in cold frosted glasses; of dancing on the starlit terrace at the graduation ball....

He thought of making love, and his mind curdled and turned away from the remembrance with a sense of loss that was almost bilious in intensity.

Sather put his head in his hands, furious at the gross injustice of his predicament. He deeply resented being thrashed by forces he did not wholly comprehend somewhere in the depths of a sterile, remorseless universe. Why, it wasn't even *his* universe which was cheating him of life. Not that his leave-taking would make one iota of difference in the grand scheme of things....

The hiss of a laser weapon outside the cubicle sundered his reverie. He sprang from the bunk. Good! That meant at least a few abominable Kree were aboard *Astraeus* — unless Lukens and his renegades had been sent to do their filthy business for them. He would be able to take some of the sadistic monsters with him, and *that* mattered.

Sather waited, pulse pounding, for another burst of laser fire. Only deafening silence pervaded the cubicle. Something relaxed inside him, some unraveling knot of vital substance which made him what he was. He felt an ethereal calmness, and was free.

Rhythmically, almost lethargically, while a die-hard portion of his ego yearned for the mournful whistle of an interceding train, Sather rolled his head four times to the left. He drew a deep breath — a final insufflation of life — and rolled his head to the right ... once, twice, three times!

Nothing happened.

A moué of terror escaped his lips. He stared at the cubicle's door in fixa-

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tion, perspiration beading his brow, and fingered the purportedly lethal implants under either jawbone.

Had he made some trifling error? Panicky, he pressed out the left-hand code with a trembling forefinger.

A firm tapping sounded on the door. "Sather...?"

The diplomat stood entranced, having recognized the timbrous voice. Snapping back the override latch with palpitant hands, he knuckled the activation plate. The door slid into the bulkhead.

Legs akimbo, His Radiance towered just outside the doorway, the injured forearm supported by a crude sling. A laser pistol dangled from his good hand. "One begs forgiveness for the trial you have just endured, Sather. Alas, it was necessary. There was something we needed to learn about humans — about you."

Life! Intoxicated with the wine of rebirth, Sather floundered from the cubicle. The laser-violated figure of a Kree sprawled nearby. Not far from the corpse, a Llanasan female was caught up in the lusty embrace of a male. In the passageway were other couples.

"H-how?" stammered the Terran.

"Our study of LEX GALACTICUM bore lucrative dividends. Shortly after departing Terra, our technical aide activated an electromagnetic device designed to inhibit any autodestruct impulses either you or the late captain might have transmitted, effectively transferring triggerman authority to us. We weren't sure of you, Sather, not certain you would ... shall we say, fulfill your contract. Not until just a moment ago."

Long seconds wore by as the diplomat assimilated the information. "But, the Kree...?"

"Ah, yes, the Kree. Their demise will elicit few tears. We have the renegade Lukens to thank. Your explanation of Llanasan ... mating customs seems to have sparked his rebellion. Lukens privately confessed the loss of two siblings during intense ground fighting in Concrellin. There, through sheer numbers, our berserk warriors must have been atrociously difficult to defense. Unable to resupply ground assault units because of unprecedented space casualties, we were forced to abandon the entire command to its fate during the Third Battle of Concrellin.

"Lukens was made aware of the Kree demands early in this sorry affair," continued His Radiance. "He felt, as do we, that restoration of our hard-won Concrellin and Achumate victories to Imperial jurisdiction would have precipitated an immediate resumption of hostilities, rendering the martyrdoms of his brothers meaningless.

"Then too," added the alien, "one imagines the rascal began to sense truth in our earlier warning of what the bestial Kree had in store for him. Saving his own skin doubtless sealed the decision. Having lived aboard the Kree

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vessel in transit, he knew how many of the animals there were and bided his time until they were grouped in reasonable proximity. Then he and his warriors cut them down — save one. The carrion lying over there was their spokesman and our blood-sworn enemy. Lukens allowed us the ecstasy of slaying it ourselves — a sweet and noble revenge indeed."

Sather's daze was wearing off. "Lukens took the Kree ship?"

"Precisely. We were so gratified by his generosity that no thought was given to detaining him. We shall be ever grateful."

"Gratitude must be secondary," said the diplomat. "He'll be hunted down and executed, along with his accomplices."

"Most unfortunate," said the alien. "We found the rogue to be rather engaging. One suspects he'll lead a merry chase and squander more than a pittance of his new-found treasure, before the Imperial authorities apprehend him. Must LEX GALACTICUM invariably be served?"

"It is the law," said the diplomat without hesitation.

"A saddening prospect. But, as you've suggested, legally mandatory." Amber cat's eyes aglow, His Radiance regarded the Terran with circumspect intensity. In a silken tone, he said, *"Might one suggest that we forego the stilted tongue of thy ancestors and converse in Llanasan? Truly, thy fluency and diction showeth marked improvement of late."*

Sather managed a wan smile. The long misunderstanding was not yet a thing of the past.

But that was coming.

ANSWER TO AUGUST ACROSTIC

Quotation: But above, up here where the winds of the city carry alchemical magic, the stone gargoyles tremble, their rock bodies beginning to moisten, and blood stands out in humid beads.
Author and work: Harlan Ellison, "Bleeding Stones."

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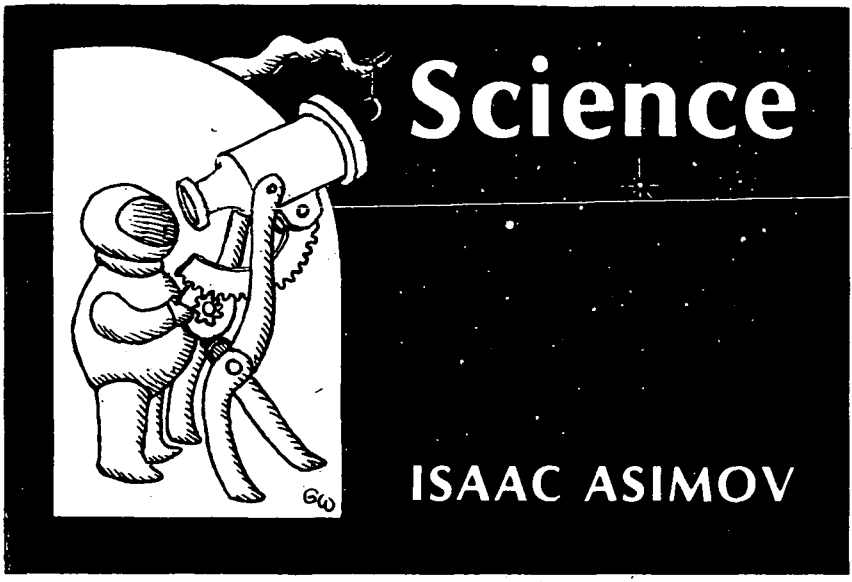

HOW LITTLE?

My beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter is planning to begin graduate courses in psychology pretty soon, and I was on the phone discussing the financial situation with her.

Since she is the apple of my eye and since I am comfortably solvent, no problem arose that would involve economizing and cornercutting, and the two of us were getting along swimmingly.

And then a nasty little thought occurred to me. Robyn seems to me to be just as fond of me in a daughterly way as I am of her in a fatherly way, but then I have never had to put that fondness under any serious strain by putting her on short rations.

We were not talking long before I began to feel uneasy and finally I felt I *had* to know.

"Robyn," I said, uncertainly, "would you love me if I were poor?"

She didn't hesitate a moment. "Sure, Dad," she said, matter-of-factly. "Even if you were poor, you would still be crazy, wouldn't you?"

It's nice to know that I am loved for a characteristic I will never lose.

I *am* crazy, after all, and always have been, and not only in the sense

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that I have an unpredictable and irreverent sense of humor, which is what Robyn means (I think). I am also crazy in that I make a serious and thoroughly useless attempt to keep up with human knowledge and feel chagrined when I find I haven't succeeded — which is every day.

For instance —

Years ago, when I first read about the white-dwarf companion of Sirius (which is properly termed "Sirius B"), I discovered that its diameter had been found to be just about equal to that of the planet Uranus, which is 46,500 kilometers (29,000 miles), even though its mass was fully equal to that of the Sun. I filed that item away in the capacious grab-bag I call my memory, and retrieved it instantly whenever I needed it.

For years, nay, decades, I kept repeating that Sirius B had the diameter of Uranus. I even did so in my book on black holes, THE COLLAPSING UNIVERSE (Walker, 1977) and in my F&SF essay, THE DARK COMPANION (April, 1977).

The trouble is that the figure I kept giving for the diameter of Sirius B is wrong and has been known to be wrong for a long time, now. As one reader said to me (with an almost audible sigh emerging from the paper), the figure I offered was an interesting historical item, but nothing more.

I just hadn't kept up with the advance of knowledge.

Now I have the 1979 figures (which I hope will stay put for a while), and I will set the record straight. We will consider how little Sirius B really is and how little (alas) I really knew about it.

The diameter of the Sun is 1.392×10^{11} centimeters, and the diameter of Sirius B is equal to 0.008 times that, or 1.11×10^{9} centimeters. If we turn that into more familiar units, then the diameter of Sirius B is equal to 11,100 kilometers or 6,900 miles.

Suppose we compare the diameter of Sirius B to Earth and to its two nearest planetary neighbors. In that case, we find:

	diameter		
	kilometers	*miles*	*Earth = 1*
Earth	12,756	7,928	1.00
Venus	12,112	7,528	0.95
Sirius B	11,100	6,900	0.87
Mars	6,800	4,230	0.53

If the question we are asking concerning Sirius B, then, is: How little? the answer is: Very little.

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Sirius B is smaller in size than either Earth or Venus, though it is considerably larger than Mars.

The surface area of Sirius B is equal to 387,000,000 square kilometers (150,000,000 square miles). That is 0.76 that of the surface area of Earth. The surface area of Sirius B is about equal to that of Earth's oceans.

As for the volume of Sirius B, that is equal to 0.66 or only 2/3 that of Earth.

How little? The diameter of Sirius is only one-quarter of what I have been claiming for it all these years, and its volume is only one-eightieth.

Next, what about the density of Sirius B?

The density of any object is its mass divided by its volume, and the mass of Sirius B, at least, hasn't changed. It's just what I always thought it was — about 1.05 times the mass of our Sun. Since the mass of the Sun is 1.989×10^{33} grams, which is 332,600 times the Earth's mass of 5.98×10^{27} grams; it follows that the mass of Sirius B is equal to $332{,}600 \times 1.05$, or just under 350,000 times the mass of the Earth.

Since the mass of Sirius B is 350,000 times the mass of the Earth and since the volume of Sirius B is 0.66 times that of the Earth, then the density of Sirius B is 350,000/0.66 or 530,000 times the Earth's density.

Earth's average density is equal to 5.52 grams per cubic centimeter. Sirius B's average density is therefore equal to $530{,}000 \times 5.52$ or 2,900,000 grams per cubic centimeter.

This means that if we imagine an American 25-cent coin (which I estimate to be about 2/3 of a cubic centimeter in volume) to be made up of matter like that in Sirius B, it would weigh about 2.1 tons.

Sirius B does not have the same density all the way through, of course. It is less dense near its surface and grows denser as we imagine ourselves going deeper into its substance until it is most dense at the core. It is estimated that the density of Sirius B at its center is 33,000,000 grams per cubic centimeter. If we imagine a 25-cent piece made of centrally-dense Sirius B material, it would weigh about 24.3 tons.

Surface gravity, next.

The gravitational pull of one body on another is directly proportional to the product of the masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between the centers of gravity of the two bodies.

If we consider the pull of Earth on an object on its surface, then $g = km'm/r^2$, where g is the gravitational pull of Earth on the object, k is the

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gravitational constant, m' is the mass of the object, m is the mass of the Earth, and r is the distance between the center of the Earth and the center of the object on its surface, this distance being equal to the radius of the Earth. If we next consider the pull of Sirius B on the same object on its surface, then $G = km'M/R^2$, where G is the gravitational pull of Sirius B on the object, k is still the gravitational constant, m' is still the mass of the object, M is the mass of Sirius B, and R is the radius of Sirius B.

To determine how much stronger the surface gravity of Sirius B is than Earth's is, we divide the equation for Sirius B by the one for Earth, like this:

$$G/g = \frac{km'M/R^2}{km'm/r^2}$$

When we do this, we see that the gravitational constant and the mass of the object on the surface cancels. We get:

$$G/g = \frac{M/R^2}{m/r^2} = Mr^2/mR^2$$

Suppose next that we take Earth's mass to be equal to 1 and its radius to be equal to 1. In that case with $m = 1$ and $r = 1$, we have:

$$G/g = M(1)^2/1R^2 = M/R^2$$

The next step is to get the values for M and R, but in order to keep the equation consistent, we have to get them in Earth-mass units and Earth-radius units. That was what we used for m and r. Since we know that Sirius B's mass is 350,000 times that of Earth and its radius is 0.87 times that of Earth, then:

$$G/g = 350{,}000/(0.87)^2 = 462{,}000$$

In short, if we imagine an object existing on Sirius B's surface, it would weigh 462,000 times more on Sirius B that it would on Earth.

For instance, I weigh 75.5 kilograms, but if I imagined myself on Sirius B, I would weigh just under 35,000,000 kilograms (38,000 tons).

The luminosity of Sirius B, the total amount of light that it gives off, is a direct observation, and it doesn't change as our knowledge of Sirius B's dimensions changes.

The luminosity of Sirius B is 0.03 times that of the Sun, so that if we imagined Sirius B in place of our Sun, we would receive only 1/33 the light and heat that we now get.

That sounds reasonable considering the fact that Sirius B is an object much smaller than the Sun. It is not quite reasonable, though, since Sirius B is so small that on the basis of size alone it could not give as much light and heat as it does.

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If two objects are at the same distance from us and are at the same temperature, then the amount of heat we would get from each is proportional to the apparent surface area of each.

For instance, if the Sun happened to have 2 times its present diameter and were at the same distance and temperature, it would present 2 x 2, or 4 times the surface area in the sky, and would deliver four times as much heat and light as it now does. If the Sun were 3 times the diameter it now is and were at the same distance and temperature, it would have 3 x 3, or 9 times the apparent surface area and would deliver 9 times as much heat and light.

It works just as well in the other direction, too. If the Sun were 1/2 its present diameter, then, at the same distance and temperature, it would have 1/2 x 1/2, or 1/4 the apparent surface area and would deliver 1/4 the light and heat.

If the Sun, then, had a diameter 0.173 times its present diameter and were at the same distance and temperature it now is, it would present a surface area and luminosity 0.03 of what it now has. A diameter of 0.173 times its present diameter would, however, amount to 0.173 x 1,392,000, or 240,800 kilometers (150,000 miles).*

This small Sun, with 0.03 times the surface area of the real Sun is actually much larger than Sirius B. Sirius B has a diameter only 0.008 times that of the Sun and a surface area only 0.000,064 times that of the Sun. With that tiny surface area it still delivers 0.03 times the light and heat of the Sun.

In order to account for this discrepancy, we have to suppose that every square centimeter of Sirius B's surface radiates 0.03/0.000064, or about 470 times as much light as every square centimeter of the Sun's surface.

The only way that can be is for Sirius B to have a much higher surface temperature than the Sun does. This is possible, despite the small size of Sirius B, because it is *not* a main-sequence star. It is a white dwarf star and the rules are different for white dwarfs.

Whereas the surface temperature of the Sun is 5,600°K. (9,550°F), the surface temperature of Sirius B is something like 27,000°K. (48,600°F) or just about five times as high. If we were close enough to Sirius B to have its globe seem as large to us as that of our Sun now does, Sirius B would be an intensely blue-white object that would broil us to death with heat and fry us to death with ultraviolet light.

**To be sure, a Sun that size couldn't possibly be at the same temperature as the Sun, if it were a main-sequence star (that is, a normal star such as at least 99 percent of the stars we observe are). However, we're just supposing.*

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Sirius B may be small but it's nothing to fool with.

Of course, to have Sirius B appear as large as the Sun would mean that we would have to be fairly close to it. We would have to be only 1,180,000 kilometers (733,000 miles) away from it, and that is only three times the distance from the Earth to the Moon.

Let us imagine instead that Sirius B existed in place of the Sun and was precisely at the Sun's present distance.

We would then get only 0.03 times the light and heat we now get, so that the Earth would freeze solid — but let us imagine that through all the permutations I will suggest that we represent observers on Earth who are immune to environmental change.

Since Sirius B has a mass 1.05 times that of our Sun, its gravitational pull on the Earth would be that much stronger, and the Earth would revolve somewhat more quickly. The year would be only 356.5 days long.

Sirius B in the position of our Sun would have an apparent diameter of only 15 seconds of arc, that is, it would appear the size that the planet Saturn appears to be when it is farthest from us. Sirius B, therefore, would be visible as a star rather than as a solar globe.

It would, however, be an enormously bright star. It would have a magnitude of -23.8, which would make it 14,000 times as bright as the full Moon apears to us now.

While the light of Sirius B, under the conditions described, would be substantially dimmer than the light of our Sun, the little star would pose a problem — at least if we were observing it with the kind of eyes we now have. It would be dangerous to look at Sirius B. For all its dimmer total radiation, Sirius B would be sending out far more ultraviolet than our Sun does, and I suspect that eyes like our own might be blinded if we unwarily caught a good look at it. (I'm not sure how efficient our ozone layer would be in this case.)

But suppose, then, that Earth was *not* circling Sirius B, but was circling the Sun exactly as it is doing. And suppose that Sirius B was the companion of our Sun as it is, in actual fact, the companion of Sirius A. If we saw Sirius B not in the place of our Sun, but as our Sun's companion, revolving about the Sun in the plane of the planetary orbits, what would it look like?

We have tried something like this before. We have imagined our Sun as a double star with a normal star as companion (PLANET OF THE DOUBLE SUN, June 1959) and with a faint red dwarf as companion (PROXIMA, January 1979). Now, however, we will imagine a white dwarf like Sirius B as a companion.

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Sirius B and Sirius A circle a common center of gravity with an orbital period (for each) of 49.94 years. This, however, takes place under the gravitational lash of the combined masses of the two stars. Sirius A, the bright normal star that is the jewel of our heavens, has a mass equal to 2.50 times that of our Sun, so that the combined mass of Sirius A and Sirius B is 3.55 times that of our Sun.

If Sirius B was imagined to be circling our Sun instead in precisely the same orbit that it circles Sirius A, then its orbital period would lengthen at once. The combined mass of the Sun and Sirius B is only 2.05 times that of our Sun alone, so that the gravitational pull that would drive the objects in their orbits would be correspondingly less than for the combination of Sirius A and Sirius B.

Sirius B and the Sun would be circling a common center of gravity (located about midway between them) with an orbital period of 65.72 years.

The mean distance of Sirius B from Sirius A is 3,000,000,000 kilometers (1,900,000,000 miles), and if this were true for the Sirius B and Sun combination, it would mean that Sirius B would be somewhat more distant from the Sun than the planet Neptune is.

Sirius B and the Sun, however, would not maintain a constant distance, for Sirius B and Sirius A follow orbits that, in actual fact, are markedly elliptical, and we must suppose the same for Sirius B and the Sun.

The orbital eccentricity of Sirius B's orbit relative to Sirius A and, therefore, relative to the Sun in our imagination, is 0.575. That means that the distance between itself and the Sun would vary from as little as 1,280,000,000 kilometers (800,000,000 miles) to as much as 4,720,000,000 kilometers (3,000,000,000 miles).

In terms of our Solar system, then, Sirius B would sometimes be closer to the Sun than Saturn is and, at the opposite end of its orbit, recede out to slightly farther than Pluto at its most distant.

Under those conditions, the Sun's outer planets would scarcely be moving in stable orbits, and we can assume they wouldn't exist. The inner Solar system, including Earth, would not be seriously affected by Sirius B, however, and we would circle the Sun as always.

In that case, what would Sirius B look like in the sky?

If it looks like a star, with no visible disc, even when it is in place of our Sun, it would certainly look like a mere star at the distance of Saturn. It would be correspondingly dimmer, too, naturally.

When Sirius B, as companion to the Sun, is closest to the Sun, and if we

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then happened to be located in that portion of our orbit that would be between the Sun and Sirius B, we would be 1,130,000,000 kilometers (707,000,000 miles) from Sirius B. It would then have a magnitude of -19.4 and be only 1/1000 as bright as the Sun. Still, 1/1000 is a respectable fraction, for Sirius B would then be 465 times as bright as the full Moon is now.

Even then, Sirius B would be an uncomfortable thing to look at, I should think. At its high temperature, as much ultraviolet light might be reaching us from Sirius B at the distance of Saturn as from the Sun at its most closer distance.

It strikes me that our Moon might present an interesting appearance in such a system — a possible three-tone look. If the Earth, the Moon, The Sun and Sirius B were properly oriented, we might, for instance, see a rather thin crescent facing the west, another much dimmer crescent facing the east, and darkness in between. The Moon, as it circled the Earth, would undergo a double phase-change of marvelous intricacy.

As the Earth went around the Sun, Sirius B would appear to move in the sky relative to the Sun, remaining in the night sky for different periods of time, just as any of the planets do now. There would be times when Sirius B would rise at sunset and set at sunrise and be visible in the sky all night through. In that case, the night would not be truly dark. It would be dimly twilit throughout.

The pattern of day, night, and "companion-light" would vary through the course of the year.

When Sirius B shone in the sky during some of the daylight hours, it would shine as a visible point of light and everything would have a very faint shadow in addition to its normal shadow, the two being at changing angles to each other in the course of a year.

This is all when Sirius B is nearest the Sun. From year to year, though, it would get fainter as it moved farther and farther from the Sun. So would the companion light and the second shadow. Finally, Sirius B would reach its farthest point, nearly 33 years after it had been at its nearest point.

At its farthest point, Sirius B would have a magnitude of only -16 and would be only 23 times as bright as the full Moon is now. Thereafter, it would begin to brighten again.

Next to the rising and setting of the Sun and to the phases of the Moon, this slow brightening and dimming of Sirius B would be the most remarkable cycle in the sky, and it seems to me that the period of the cycle would be given enormous importance.

The slow cycle of Sirius B would, after all, almost match the normal

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lifetime of a human being, and no doubt primitive people would imagine Sirius B to be matching the beat of human life. Think of the fun astrologers would have had with *that*, and thank heaven we are spared it.

Sirius B was not always a white dwarf, of course. Once upon a time it was a main-sequence star like the Sun. We can suppose that it was not much more massive than it is now, and that it was not massive enough to undergo a supernova explosion once its hydrogen fuel was consumed. It merely expanded to a red giant and then collapsed non-catastrophically.

As an ordinary star (following the same orbit we imagined Sirius B to have as our Sun's companion), Sirius B would have been perhaps 35 times brighter at every stage than it would be as a white dwarf. At its closest approach, it would be 1/30 as bright as our Sun and over 16,000 times as bright as the full Moon. Even at its farthest recession, it would be 800 times as bright as the full Moon now is.

Nor would Sirius B appear to have a solar globe most of the time, even as a normal star. At its closest, though, it would be nearly 6 minutes of arc across and would seem like a tiny little circle of light.

And then the time would come when enough of the hydrogen fuel would have been lost for helium-burning to begin at the center of Sirius B. That would mean it would begin expanding in size, and that its surface would cool and redden as a result.

It would be a fascinating change, as Sirius B, which would be by far the brightest object in our sky, next to the Sun, would slowly grow and redden. The process might take many thousands of years and the change, I dare say, would not be visible in the lifetime of a particular person. However, the scientific records over the course of generations would make it obvious that Sirius B. was growing and reddening. Finally, the growth would slow and stop and the red orb would reach a maximum size.

We might guess that its diameter would then be something like 200,000,000 kilometers (125,000,000 miles).

In that case, when Sirius B was farthest from the Sun, we would see it in the sky as a circle of red light with a diameter of nearly 1.4°. It would be 2.56 times as wide as the Sun appears to us now and it would have 6.57 times the area. It would, however, have so cool a surface that it would deliver considerably less heat than the Sun does.

At its closest, the Sirius B red giant would have a diameter more than four times what it had at its farthest. It would then have a little more than 25 times the surface area of the Sun.

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Under such circumstances we would have a pattern of white light when the Sun was in the sky, orange light when Sun and Sirius B were together in the sky, red light when only Sirius B was in the sky, and darkness when neither was in the sky. When both were in the sky, there would be red shadows and white shadows set at angles, turning back where they overlapped near the object that cast them.

The red giant would remain at its peak for a long period of time — a million years, perhaps — and then the time would come when it would collapse suddenly, perhaps in a matter of hours. It would leave behind it a ring of gas, marking its outer limits (thus forming a "planetary nebula") and at the center there would suddenly be a white dwarf. The ring of gas would expand and grow thinner, engulf Earth and Sun and gradually vanish. Only the white dwarf would be left and, we hope, photographic records of the red giant or future generations would scarcely believe in its existence.*

Sirius B may not have behaved this way in actual fact. It might have been a much more massive star when it was on the main sequence. Then, as it expanded to a red giant, matter from it may have been spilled over into Sirius A. This may have saved Sirius B from exploding violently, but it also increased the mass and brightness of Sirius A and shortened its ultimate lifetime.

It is even possible human beings witnessed the change. I have heard that a number of ancient astronomers described Sirius as being red in color and, if so, they could scarcely have been mistaken about it. Neither can present astronomers be mistaken in seeing Sirius as blue-white.

It may be that the ancients were watching not the Sirius A we see, but Sirius B as a red-giant while it was bleeding matter over to a relatively dim Sirius A.

Then, at some time in the early Middle Ages, when astronomy was at a low ebb and the sudden change went unnoticed, Sirius B may have collapsed and become too dim to be visible with the unaided eye, leaving behind the suddenly enhanced blue-white sparkle of Sirius A.

I've never seen this suggestion advanced anywhere, and it sounds a little too spectacular to be true, but —

**Mind you, I am ignoring the fact that the formation of the red giant would probably wipe out life on Earth.*

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A perfectly composed story about a passenger in a French railway station, who, in hurrying for his train, finds himself thrown into a totally different and wondrous journey.

The Extraordinary Voyages of Amélie Bertrand

BY

JOANNA RUSS

Hommage à Jules Verne

In the summer of 192- there occurred to me the most extraordinary event of my life.

I was traveling on business and was in the French countryside, not far from Lyons, waiting for my train on a small railway platform on the outskirts of a town I shall call Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. (This is not its name.) The weather was cool, although it was already June, and I shared the platform with only one other passenger: a plump woman of at least forty, by no means pretty but respectably dressed, the true type of our provincial *bonne bourgeoise*, who sat on the bench provided for the comfort of passengers and knitted away at some indeterminate garment.

The station at Beaulieu, like so many of our railway stops in small towns, is provided with a central train station of red brick through which runs an arch of passageway, also of red brick, which thus divides the edifice of the station into a ticket counter and waiting room on one side and a small café on the other. Thus, having attended one's train on the wrong side of the station (for there are railroad tracks on both sides of the edifice), one may occasionally find oneself making the traversal of the station in order to catch one's train, usually at the last minute.

So it occurred with me. I heard the approach of my train, drew out my watch, and found that the mild spring weather had caused me to indulge in a reverie not only lengthy but at a distance from my desired track; the two-fifty-one for Lyons was about to enter Beaulieu, but I was wrongly situated to place myself on board; were I not quick, no entrainment would take place.

Blessing the good fathers of Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont for their foresight in so

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dividing their train depot, I walked briskly but with no excessive haste towards the passage. I had not the slightest doubt of catching my train. I even had leisure to reflect on the bridge which figures so largely in the name of the town and to recall that, according to my knowledge, this bridge had been destroyed in the time of Caractacus; then I stepped between the buildings. I noticed that my footsteps echoed from the walls of the tunnel, a phenomenon one may observe upon entering any confined space. To the right of me and to the left were walls of red brick. The air was invigoratingly fresh, the weather sunny and clear, and ahead was the wooden platform, the well-trimmed bushes, and the potted geraniums of the other side of the Beaulieu train station.

Nothing could have been more ordinary.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the lady I had seen knitting on the platform was herself entering the passage at a decorous distance behind me. We were, it seems, to become fellow passengers. I turned and raised my hat to her, intending to continue. I could not see the Lyons train, but to judge by the faculty of hearing, it was rounding the bend outside the station. I placed my hat back upon my head, reached the center of the tunnel, or rather, a point midway along its major diameter —

Will you believe me? Probably. You are English; the fogs and literature of your unfortunate climate predispose you to marvels. Your winters cause you to read much; your authors reflect to you from their pages the romantic imagination of a *refugé* from the damp and cold, to whom anything may happen if only it does so outside his windows! I am the product of another soil; I am logical, I am positive, I am French. Like my famous compatriot, I cry, "Where is this marvel? Let him produce it!" I myself do not believe what happened to me. I believe it no more than I believe that Phineas Fogg circumnavigated the globe in 187-and still lives today in London with the lady he rescued from a funeral pyre in Benares.

Nonetheless I will attempt to describe what happened.

The first sensation was a retardation of time. It seemed to me that I had been in the passage at Beaulieu for a very long time, and the passage itself seemed suddenly to become double its length, or even triple. Then my body became heavy, as in a dream; there was also a disturbance of balance as though the tunnel sloped *down* towards its farther end and some increase in gravity were pulling me in that direction. A phenomenon even more disturbing was the peculiar *haziness* that suddenly obscured the forward end of the Beaulieu tunnel, as if Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, far from enjoying the temperate warmth of an excellent June day, were actually melting in the heat — yes, heat! — a terrible warmth like that

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of a furnace, and yet humid, entirely unknown to our moderate climate even in the depths of summer. In a moment my summer clothing was soaked, and I wondered with horror whether I dared offend customary politeness by opening my collar. The noise of the Lyons train, far from disappearing, now surrounded me on all sides as if a dozen trains, and not merely one, were converging upon Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, or as if a strong wind (which was pushing me forward) were blowing. I attempted to peer into the mistiness ahead of me but could see nothing. A single step farther and the mist swirled aside; there seemed to be a vast spray of greenery beyond — indeed, I could distinctly make out the branches of a large palm tree upon which intense sunlight was beating — and then, directly crossing it, a long, thick, sinuous, gray serpent which appeared to writhe from side to side, and which then fixed itself around the trunk of the palm, bringing into view a gray side as large as the opening of the tunnel itself, four gray columns beneath, and two long ivory tusks.

It was an elephant.

It was the roar of the elephant which brought me to my senses. Before this I had proceeded as in an astonished dream; now I turned and attempted to retrace my steps but found that I could hardly move *up* the steep tunnel against the furious wind which assailed me. I was aware of the cool, fresh, familiar spring of Beaulieu, very small and precious, appearing like a photograph or a scene observed through the diminishing, not the magnifying end, of an opera glass, and of the impossibility of ever attaining it. Then a strong arm seized mine, and I was back on the platform from which I had ventured — it seemed now so long ago! — sitting on the wooden bench while the good bourgeoise in the decent dark dress inquired after my health.

I cried, "But the palm tree — the tropical air — the elephant!"

She said in the calmest way in the world, "Do not distress yourself, monsieur. It was merely Uganda."

I may mention here that Madame Bertrand, although not in her first youth, is a woman whose dark eyes sparkle with extraordinary charm. One must be an imbecile not to notice this. Her concern is sincere, her manner *séduisante*, and we had not been in conversation five minutes before she abandoned the barriers of reserve and explained to me not only the nature of the experience I had undergone, but (in the café of the train station at Beaulieu, over a lemon ice) her own extraordinary history.

"Shortly after the termination of the Great War" (said Madame Bertrand) "I began a habit which I have continued to this day: whenever my husband, Aloysius Bertrand, is away from Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont on business, as often happens, I visit my sister-in-law in Lyons, leaving Beaulieu on one day in the middle of the week and re-

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turning on the next. At first my visits were uneventful. Then, one fateful day only two years ago, I happened to depart from the wrong side of the train station after purchasing my ticket, and so found myself seeking to approach my train through that archway or passage where you, Monsieur, so recently ventured. There were the same effects, but I attributed them to an attack of faintness and continued, expecting my hour's ride to Lyons, my sister-in-law's company, the cinema, the restaurant, and the usual journey back the next day.

"Imagine my amazement — no, my stupefaction — when I found myself instead on a rough wooden platform surrounded on three sides by the massive rocks and lead-colored waters of a place entirely unfamiliar to me! I made inquiries and discovered, to my unbounded astonishment, that I was on the last railway stop or terminus of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the South American continent, and that I had engaged myself to sail as supercargo on a whaling vessel contracted to cruise the waters of Antarctica for the next two years. The sun was low, the clouds massing above, and behind me (continuing the curve of the rock-infested bay) was a jungle of squat pine trees, expressing by the irregularity of their trunks the violence of the climate.

"What could I do? My clothing was Victorian, the ship ready to sail, the six months' night almost upon us. The next train was not due until spring.

"To make a long story short, I sailed.

"You might expect that a lady, placed in such a situation, would suffer much that was disagreeable and discommoding. So it was. But there is also a somber charm to the far south which only those who have traveled there can know: the stars glittering on the ice fields, the low sun, the penguins, the icebergs, the whales. And then there were the sailors, children of the wilderness, young, ardent, sincere, especially one, a veritable Apollo with a broad forehead and golden mustachios. To be frank, I did not remain aloof; we became acquainted, one thing led to another, and *enfin* I learned to love the smell of whale oil. Two years later, alighting from the railway train I had taken to Nome, Alaska, where I had gone to purchase my *trousseau* (for having made telegraphic inquiries about Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, I found that no Monsieur Bertrand existed therein and so considered myself a widow) I found myself, not in my Victorian dress in the bustling and frigid city of Nome, that commercial capital of the North with its outlaws, dogs, and Esquimaux in furs carrying loads of other furs upon their sleds, but in my old, familiar visiting-dress (in which I had started from Beaulieu so long before) on the platform at Lyons, with my sister-in-law waiting for me. Not only that, but in the more than two years I had remained away, no

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more time had passed in what I am forced to call the real world than the hour required for the train ride from Beaulieu to Lyons! I had expected Garance to fall upon my neck with cries of astonishment at my absence and the strangeness of my dress; instead she inquired after my health, and not waiting for an answer, began to describe in the most ordinary manner and at very great length the roast of veal which she had purchased that afternoon for dinner.

"At first, so confused and grief-stricken was I, that I thought I had somehow missed the train for Nome, and that returning at once from Lyons to Beaulieu would enable me to reach Alaska. I almost cut my visit to Lyons short on the plea of ill-health. But I soon realized the absurdity of imagining that a railway could cross several thousand miles of ocean, and since my sister-in-law was already suspicious (I could not help myself during the visit and often burst out with a *'Mon cher Jack!'*) I controlled myself and gave vent to my feelings only on the return trip to Beaulieu — which, far from ending in Nome, Alaska, ended at the Beaulieu train station and at exactly the time predicted by the railway timetable.

"I decided that my two-years' holiday had been only what the men of psychological science would entitle an unusually complete and detailed dream. The ancient Chinese were, I believe, famous for such vivid dreams; one of their poets is said to have experienced an entire lifetime of love, fear, and adventure while washing his feet. This was my case exactly. Here was I not a day — nay not an hour — older, and no one knew what had passed in the Antarctic save I myself.

"It was a reasonable explanation, but it had one grave defect, which rendered it totally useless.

"It was false.

"Since that time, Monsieur, I have gone on my peculiar voyages, my holidays, *mes vacances*, as I call them, not once but dozens of times. My magic carpet is the railway station at Beaulieu, or to be more precise, the passageway between the ticket office and the café at precisely ten minutes before three in the afternoon. A traversal of the passage at any other time brings me merely to the other side of the station, but a traversal of the passage at this particular time brings me to some far, exotic corner of the globe. Perhaps it is Ceylon with its crowds of variegated hue, its scent of incense, its pagodas and rickshaws. Or the deserts of Al-Iqah, with the crowds of Bedawi, dressed in flowing white and armed with rifles, many of whom whirl round about one another on horseback. Or I will find myself on the languid islands of Tahiti, with the graceful and dusky inhabitants bringing me bowls of *poi* and garlands of flowers whose beauty is unmatched anywhere else in the tropical portion of the globe. Nor have my holidays been entirely confined to

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the terrestrial regions. Last February I stepped through the passage to find myself on the sands of a primitive beach under a stormy, gray sky; in the distance one could perceive the roarings of saurians and above me were the giant saw-toothed, purple leaves of some palmaceous plant, one (as it turned out) entirely unknown to botanical science.

"No, monsieur, it was not Ceylon; it was Venus. It is true that I prefer a less overcast climate, but still one can hardly complain. To lie in the darkness of the Venerian night, on the silky volcanic sands, under the starry leaves of the *laradh*, while imbibing the million perfumes of the night-blooming flowers and listening to the music of the *karakh* — really, one does not miss the blue sky. Although only a few weeks ago I was in a place that also pleased me: imagine a huge, whitish-blue sky, a desert with giant mountains on the horizon, and the lean, hard-bitten water-prospectors with their dowsing rods, their high-heeled boots, and their large hats, worn to protect faces already tanned and wrinkled from the intense sunlight.

"No, not Mars, Texas. They are marvelous people, those American pioneers, the men handsome and laconic, the women sturdy and efficient. And then one day I entrained to Lyons only to find myself on a railway platform that resembled a fishbowl made of tinted glass, while around me rose mountains fantastically slender into a black sky where the stars shone like hard marbles, scarcely twinkling at all. I was wearing a glass helmet and clothes that resembled a diver's. I had no idea where I was until I rose, and then to my edified surprise, instead of rising in the usual manner, I positively bounded into the air!

"I was on the Moon.

"Yes, monsieur, the Moon, although some distance in the future, the year two thousand eighty and nine, to be precise. At that date human beings will have established a colony on the Moon. My carriage swiftly shot down beneath one of the Selenic craters to land in their principal city, a fairy palace of slender towers and domes of glass, for they use as building material a glass made from the native silicate gravel. It was on the Moon that I gathered whatever theory I now have concerning my peculiar experiences with the railway passage at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, for I made the acquaintance there of the principal mathematician of the twenty-first century, a most elegant lady, and put the problem to her. You must understand that on the Moon *les nègres*, *les juifs* even *les femmes* may obtain high positions and much influence; it is a true republic. This lady introduced me to her colleague, a black physicist of more-than-normal happenings, or *le paraphysique* as they call it, and the two debated the matter during an entire day (not a Selenic day, of course, since that would have amounted to a time equal to

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twenty-eight days of our own). They could not agree, but in brief, as they told me, either the railway tunnel at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont has achieved infinite connectivity or it is haunted. To be perfectly sincere, I regretted leaving the Moon. But one has one's obligations. Just as my magic carpet here at Beaulieu is of the nature of a railway tunnel, and just as I always find myself in *mes vacances* at first situated on a railway platform, thus my return must also be effected by that so poetically termed road of iron; I placed myself into the railway that connects two of the principal Selenic craters, and behold! — I alight at the platform at Lyons, not a day older.

"Indeed, monsieur" (and here Madame Bertrand coughed delicately) "as we are both people of the world, I may mention that certain other of the biological processes also suspend themselves, a fact not altogether to my liking, since my dear Aloysius and myself are entirely without family. Yet this suspension has its advantages; if I had aged as I have lived, it would be a woman of seventy who speaks to you now. In truth, how can one age in worlds that are, to speak frankly, not quite real? Though perhaps if I had remained permanently in one of these worlds, I too would have begun to age along with the other inhabitants. That would be a pleasure on the Moon, for my mathematical friend was age two hundred when I met her, and her acquaintance, the professor of *le paraphysique*, two hundred and five."

Here Madame Bertrand, to whose recital I had been listening with breathless attention, suddenly ceased speaking. Her lemon ice stood untouched upon the table. So full was I of projects to make the world acquainted with this amazing history that I did not at first notice the change in Madame Bertrand's expression, and so I burst forth:

"The National Institute — the Académie — no, the universities, and the newspapers also —"

But the charming lady, with a look of horror, and risen from the table, crying, "Mon dieu! My train! What will Garance think? What will she say? Monsieur, not a word to anyone!"

Imagine my consternation when Madame Bertrand here precipitously departed from the café and began to cross the station towards that ominous passageway. I could only postulate, "But, madame, consider! Ceylon! Texas! Mars!"

"No, it is too late," said she. "Only at the former time in the train schedule. Monsieur, remember, please, not a word to anyone!"

Following her, I cried, "But if you do not return —" and she again favored me with her delightful smile, saying rapidly, "Do not distress yourself, monsieur. By now I have developed certain sensations — a *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades — which warns me of the condition of the passageway. The later hour is always safe. But my train —!"

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And so Madame Bertrand left me. Amazing woman! A traveler not only to the far regions of the earth but to those of imagination, and yet perfectly respectable, gladly fulfilling the duties of family life, and punctually (except for this one time) meeting her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance Bertrand, on the train platform at Lyons.

Is that the end of my story? No, for I was fated to meet Amélie Bertrand once again.

My business, which I have mentioned to you, took me back to Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont at the end of that same summer. I must confess that I hoped to encounter Madame Bertrand, for I had made it my intention to notify at least several of our great national institutions of the extraordinary powers possessed by the railway passage at Beaulieu, and yet I certainly could not do so without Madame Bertrand's consent. Again it was shortly before three in the afternoon; again the station platform was deserted. I saw a figure which I took to be that of Madame Bertrand seated upon the bench reserved for passengers and hastened to it with a glad cry —

But it was not Amélie Bertrand. Rather it was a thin and elderly female, entirely dressed in the dullest of black and completely without the charm I had expected to find in my fellow passenger. The next moment I heard my name pronounced and was delighted to perceive, issuing from the ticket office, Madame Bertrand herself, wearing a light-colored summer dress.

But where was the gaiety, the charm, the pleasant atmosphere of June? Madame Bertrand's face was closed, her eyes watchful, her expression determined. I would immediately have opened to her my immense projects, but with a shake of her head the lady silenced me, indicating the figure I have already mentioned.

"My sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance," she said. I confess that I nervously expected that Aloysius Bertrand himself would now appear. But we were alone on the platform. Madame Bertrand continued: "Garance, this is the gentleman who was the unfortunate cause of my missing my train last June."

Mademoiselle Garance, as if to belie the reputation for loquacity I had heard applied to her earlier in the summer, said nothing, but merely clutched to her meager bosom a small train case.

Madame Bertrand said to me, "I have explained to Garance the occasion of your illness last June and the manner in which the officials of the station detained me. I am glad to see you looking so well."

This was a clear hint that Mademoiselle Garance was to know nothing of her sister-in-law's history; thus I merely bowed and nodded. I wished to have the opportunity of conversing with Madame Bertrand more freely, but I could say nothing in the presence of her sister-in-law. Desperately I began: "You are taking the train today —"

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"For the sake of nostalgia," said Madame Bertrand. "After today I shall never set foot in a railway carriage. Garance may if she likes, but I will not. Aeroplanes, motor cars, and ships will be good enough for me. Perhaps like the famous American, Madame Earhart, I shall learn to fly. This morning Aloysius told me the good news: a change in his business arrangements has enabled us to move to Lyons, which we are to do at the end of the month."

"And in the intervening weeks —?" said I.

Madame Bertrand replied composedly, "There will be none. They are tearing down the station."

What a blow! And there sat the old maid, Mademoiselle Garance, entirely unconscious of the impending loss to science! I stammered something — I know not what — but my good angel came to my rescue; with an infinitesimal movement of the fingers, she said:

"Oh, monsieur, my conscious pains me too much! Garance, would you believe that I told this gentleman the most preposterous stories? I actually told him — seriously, now — that the passageway of this train station was the gateway to another world! No, many worlds, and that I had been to all of them. Can you believe it of me?" She turned to me. "Oh, monsieur," she said, "you were a good listener. You only pretended to believe. Surely you cannot imagine that a respectable woman like myself would leave her husband by means of a railway passage which has achieved infinite connectivity?"

Here Madame Bertrand looked at me in a searching manner, but I was at a loss to understand her intention in so doing and said nothing.

She went on, with a little shake of the head. "I must confess it; I am addicted to storytelling. Whenever my dear Aloysius left home on his business trips, he would say to me, *'Occupe-toi, occupe-toi, Amélie!'* and, alas, I have occupied myself only too well. I thought my romance might divert your mind from your ill-health and so presumed to tell you an unlikely tale of extraordinary voyages. Can you forgive me?"

I said something polite, something I do not now recall. I was, you understand, still reeling from the blow. All that merely a fable! Yet with what detail, what plausible circumstance Madame Bertrand had told her story. I could only feel relieved I had not actually written to the National Institute. I was about to press both ladies to take some refreshment with me, when Madame Bertrand (suddenly putting her hand to her heart in a gesture that seemed to me excessive) cried, "Our train!" and turning to me, remarked, "Will you accompany us down the passage?"

Something made me hesitate; I know not what.

"Think, monsieur," said Madame Bertrand, with her hand still pressed to

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her heart, "where will it be this time? A London of the future, perhaps, enclosed against the weather and built entirely of glass? Or perhaps the majestic, high plains of Colorado? Or will we find ourselves in one of the underground cities of the moons of Jupiter, in whose awesome skies the mighty planet rises and sets with a visual diameter more than that of the terrestrial Alps?"

She smiled with humor at Mademoiselle Garance, remarking, "Such are the stories I told this gentleman, dear Garance; they were a veritable novel," and I saw that she was gently teasing her sister-in-law, who naturally did not know what any of this was about.

Mademoiselle Garance ventured to say timidly that she "liked to read novels."

I bowed.

Suddenly I heard the sound of the train outside Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. Madame Bertrand cried in an utterly prosaic voice, "Our train! Garance, we shall miss our train!" and again she asked, "Monsieur, will you accompany us?"

I bowed, but remained where I was. Accompanied by the thin, stooped figure of her sister-in-law, Madame Bertrand walked quickly down the passageway which divides the ticket room of the Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont station from the tiny café. I confess that when the two ladies reached the midpoint of the longitudinal axis of the passageway, I involuntarily closed my eyes, and when I opened them, the passage was empty.

What moved me then I do not know, but I found myself quickly traversing the passageway, seeing in my mind's eye Madame Bertrand boarding the Lyons train with her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance. One could certainly hear the train; the sound of its engine filled the whole station. I believe I told myself that I wished to exchange one last polite word. I reached the other side of the station —

And there was no Lyons train there.

There were no ladies on the platform.

There is, indeed, no two-fifty-one train to Lyons whatsoever, not on the schedule of any line!

Imagine my sensations, my dear friend, upon learning that Madame Bertrand's story was true, all of it! It is true, all too true, all of it is true, and my Amélie is gone forever!

"My" Amélie I call her; yet she still belongs (in law) to Aloysius Bertrand, who will, no doubt, after the necessary statutory period of waiting is over, marry again, and thus become a respectable and unwitting bigamist.

That animal could never have understood her!

Even now (if I may be permitted that phrase) Amélie Bertrand may be drifting down one of the great Venerian rivers on a gondola, listening to the music of the *karakh;* even now she

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may perform acts of heroism on Airstrip One or chat with her mathematical friend on a balcony that overlooks the airy towers and flower-filled plazas of the Selenic capitol. I have no doubt that if you were to attempt to find the places Madame Bertrand mentioned by looking in the Encyclopedia or a similar work of reference, you would not succeed. As she herself mentioned, they are "not quite real." There are strange discrepancies.

Alas, my friend, condole with me; by now all such concern is academic, for the train station at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont is gone, replaced by a vast erection swarming with workmen, a giant *hangar* (I learned the name from one of them), or edifice for the housing of aeroplanes. I am told that large numbers of these machines will soon fly from *hangar* to *hangar* across the country.

But think: these aeroplanes, will they not in time be used for ordinary business travel, for scheduled visits to resorts and other places? In short, are they not even now the railways of the new age? Is it not possible that the same condition, whether of infinite connectivity or of hauntedness, may again obtain, perhaps in the same place where the journeys of my vanished angel have established a precedent or predisposition?

My friend, collude with me. The *hangar* at Beaulieu will soon be finished, or so I read in the newspapers. I shall go down into the country and establish myself near this *hangar;* I shall purchase a ticket for a ride in one of the new machines, and then we shall see. Perhaps I will enjoy only a pleasant ascension into the air and a similar descent. Perhaps I will instead feel that *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades of which Madame Bertrand spoke; well, no matter: my children are grown, my wife has a generous income, the *frisson* will not dismay me. I shall walk down the corridor or passageway in or around the *hangar* at precisely nine minutes before three and into the space between the worlds; I shall again feel the strange retardation of time, I shall feel the heaviness of the body, I shall see the haziness at the other end of the tunnel, and then through the lashing wind, through the mistiness which envelops me, with the rushing and roaring of an invisible aeroplane in my ears, I shall proceed. Madame Bertrand was kind enough to delay her own holiday to conduct me back from Uganda; she was generous enough to offer to share the traversal of the passage with me a second time. Surely such kindness and generosity must have its effect! This third time I will proceed. Away from my profession, my daily newspaper, my chess games, my *digestif* — in short, away from all those habits which, it is understood, are given us to take the place of happiness. Away from the petty annoyances of life I shall proceed, away from a dull old age, away from the confusions and terrors of a Europe

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grown increasingly turbulent, to —

— *What?*

The above copy of a letter was found in a volume of the Encyclopedia (U-Z) in the Bibliothèque National. *It is believed from the evidence that the writer disappeared at a certain provincial town (called "Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont" in the manuscript) shortly after purchasing a ticket for a flight in an aeroplane at the flying field there, a pastime popular among holiday makers.*

He has never been seen again.

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REPORT ON COMPETITION 22

In the May issue we asked competitors to rewrite the pointless anecdote offered in an example in the style of any science fiction writer. Or, as an alternative, to retell the story of The Three Little Pigs in the style of any sf writer. The response was moderate in size and uniformly high in quality; so uniform that we are begging off on separating the winners this month and will randomly award the prizes among the following best entries:

In the style of Harlan Ellison

So there were these three pigs. Pink-eyed, snub-nosed oinkers: blend of Eddie G. Robinson and W.C. Fields. Pig One, the hippie, moved into a tent outside Albuquerque and flipped off the rednecks in their passing semi's. Pig Two, the intellectual, taught creative writing at the University of New Mexico, and he built a Japanese teahouse out in the desert, rice-paper windows, stick foundations. Pig Three, a capitalist pig, had this geodesic dome near the outdoor opera close to Santa Fe, where he controlled a worldwide network of publishing houses.

Wolf. Anthracite eyes gleaming under brooding brow; eager bubbles of foam coalescing in thin lines around red-hungry jaws: Wolf.

One day when Pig One stuck out his hand to flip off a redneck, it was Wolf behind the wheel of the semi. Wolf swerved clean into Pig One's tent and left a mile-long smear of purplish pig guts on Interstate 40. That night Wolf followed Pig Two home after a bullshit academic lecture on science fiction. At midnight Pig Two woke to the sound of ominous rumbling. The whole rice-paper wall came down on him, and Pig Two was mashed into a purplish ooze under the treads of a Caterpillar tractor driven by Wolf, triumphant.

The next day Wolf received a bonus from his boss, Pig Three, for bumping off Pig Three's worthless brothers, just before Pig Three tripped him into a bottomless pit with the handle of a large-nippled slot machine named Maggie.

—John R. Dunlap
San Jose, Ca.

In the style of Isaac Asimov

Puns upon a time, there were three civilized, Arcturian pigs of the species *khild*. Each had built his own home. The first khild, named Refute, was sick, and only had enough strength to build his house of straw. The second was lazy, and used sticks. The third was smart; he built with bricks and made his edifice complex.

A prowling wolf, howling in the night, heard the echo of his voice rebounding from these dwellings. Ah, he thought, it must be the wall of the khild. Running to the first home, he said, "Let me in."

"No way," came the reply from within the house of ill Refute.

The wolf huffed and puffed and destrawed the house. The khild dove into the next one. But the wolf huffed and puffed again, and blew the stick house limb from limb.

The two khilds escaped to the brick house. The wolf huffed and puffed. Then he put down his cigarette and tried for a hat trick. But his lungs weren't up to it, so he slunk away in search of easier prey. He decided to hunt for the wildcat known as the hun.

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Success would be guaranteed, for the hun is the lowest form of puma.

—David Lubar
Edison, NJ

In the style of Jack Vance

The shimmering blues and violets from the midday suns cast multiple shadows beneath the orange and pink roof slats of the Tarquay to Munhill denham*. Arzal Gherkin used a green and purple kerchief to pat at the rivulets of perspiration that ran down his neck as he and his fellow passengers jounced along the poorly cobbled streets toward their destination. He was dolefully passing the time by surreptitiously observing another occupant of the denham, a man of the obscure Grey Abbey sect which was known almost solely for its disdain of local fashion. The stark, drab grey of his costume, especially that of his felt hat encircled by plaited cords instead of the more popular brightly colored ribbons and feathers, drew attention by virtue of its subdued uniqueness.

The man suddenly turned to a fellow passenger and began to berate him quite vigorously, accusing him of purposefully scuffing the toes of his boots at every stop when moving aside to allow other passengers to board or to alight. Just as suddenly he ceased his harangue and seated himself in a recently vacated side-seat from which he glowered for the remainder of the journey at the passing tree-beet forests.

Later in the day while partaking of some Green Moss wine and reed cakes along the esplanade near the station in Munhill, Arzal Gherkin noticed the man again, this time engaged in earnest conversation with another member of his drab sect. The man was apparently being advised to seek the assistence of a nearby tailor in order to re-situate the top button on his lapelled overjacket, to what advantage one could only speculate.

—Paul Major
Baton Rouge, La.

**A contrivance for public transportation on Homyl:281; its gaudy color scheme reflects its owner's social status, and the intricacies of design about the headboard reveal much about his mental stability.*

In the style of Philip K. Dick:

Returning to his conapt on a bus, he felt the *koinos kosmos* slip away. What would happen, he thought, if he asked the bus driver? But, no. Everyone else thought they were riding the S bus; only he knew it was now No. 84. Yes. He opened his eyes and looked around for evidence to support this theory. The bus continued on through the Parc Monceau district.

Or did it?

After all, he had boarded the bus in Marin County, and there was no Parc Monceau district in California. Perhaps if he asked a passenger. He glanced ahead at the Longnecker, but the plaited cord around the Longnecker's felt hat identified him as a PEAK-man; so he decided to remain silent. I think, he thought, the other passengers on this bus are mere props. So it would be useless to ask them. The bus passed a vacant lot.

Suddenly, the PEAK-man threw himself on to a seat which had become vacant. The whole row of seats, in fact, had become vacant. So had the PEAK-man. Molecules dispersed. The bus went out of existence. In its place was a sheet of paper with all of these words printed on it. He turned it over. On the other side were the words, "Please retype other side and enter in Competition 22."

—Robert Stewart
Somerville, MA

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In the style of Robert Heinlein

The triple suns of Herculon B danced a jig high overhead. Tom felt a sharp elbow jab him through the double-bind pleats of his mono-thread suit. He turned to face the gangly, long necked man leaning on the aft rail of the Herculon B to Sirius star cruiser. As he hit his ancient mmershaum pipe with a pocket laser, Tom noticed something odd about him.

Why, Tom thought, *he's using nickle-steel for space helmet reinforcing instead of ferro-cement!*

"You've been stepping on my toes, partner," said the gangly man, dense clouds of pumice smoke leaking through the pipe's complex zero-g filtering system.

"I-I'm sorry," said Tom, blushing. *Just two hours away from Aunt Zeb and Uncle Eke's nuclear breeding farm and already I show I'm a hick!*

The tall man waved away the smoke. "Think nothing of it," he said, lowering himself to the floor. The memory plastic of the deck anticipated and flowed upwards, forming a chair beneath him. "I could see you're lost in thought. Me, too. I'm going to Sirius Major IV to see a man about modifying certain cosmetic designs on my outer protective suit."

—Buzz Dixon
Van Nuys, Ca.

In the style of Barry Malzberg

The bus map is a small mockery, printed without street names, as if to tell me that I no longer deserve to know where I am going. I will have to do something about this. I am not like these others, not like the woman next to me with the sparse beard and shopping bag, not like the man nearby in the torn fatigue jacket and tan chinos. I do not belong on a bus. But even as I form the thought, the map betrays me with its illiterate defiance; I have almost missed my transfer. I lunge for the exit, brushing past the man in fatigues, and he turns to accost me, accusing me of deliberately stepping on his feet. I know that I have done no such thing, but I mumble a few words of apology; in the face of his madness, argument would only be futile. An elderly black woman reassures me that he does the same thing to every other rider who passes him. Even this reassurance is a reproach; I need not have wasted even an automatic apology on him.

Two hours later, I pass my fatigue-clad nemesis talking with another man in a similar costume. He plucks at the fatigue jacket, pulling it into some semblance of shape, demonstrating his faith that a pin here and there, a tear sewn together, can somehow alter its basic nature.

—Marc Desmond
Brooklyn, N.Y.

COMPETITION 23 (suggested by David M. Vereschagin)

Have you noticed in modern sf a trend toward long and unwieldy titles? For example: "If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" Or, "With the Rentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Alabama." Readers are invited to submit equally long and entertaining titles, keeping them to 50 words or less: e.g., "When I Was Young in the Older Days at the Fall of Pompeii, the Spacemen Came Down and Stole My Soul."

(See page 162 for rules and prizes.)

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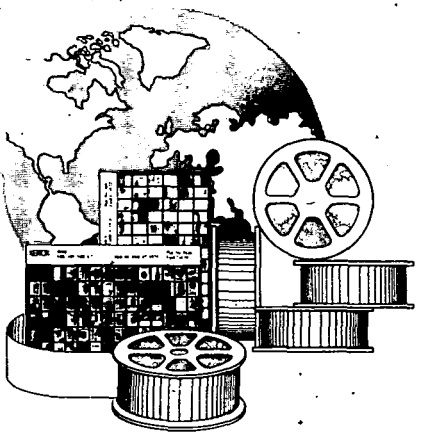

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Prizes: First prize, six different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks. Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 22 will appear in the Jan. issue.

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